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## **On Fantasy's Transmediality: A Cognitive Approach**

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**Abstract** • Books but also movies, TV-series, fanfictions, role-playing games, and much more. The fantasy narrative genre shows one of the highest levels of transmediality. This paper proposes an explanation of the phenomenon, combining the worldbuilding theory with three different approaches in the field of cognitive science. Referring to Gallese's embodied simulation, the transportation in the Tolkienian "Secondary Worlds" invites a progressive refinement of the fictional universe, allowing multiple media to support its configuration—while also improving personal cognitive skills. In terms of Clark's extended mind, then, the peculiar involvement stimulated by this type of creations incites a proactive approach to the reading experience, widening it through different tools—while also saturating the possible extensions of the imaginative space. At the same time, these processes can induce insidious addictive dynamics (usually related to the subject's proneness to excessive daydreaming, but also to the general characteristics of children's imagination), reinforced by marketing strategies which multiply the cognitive approaches. The theoretical discourse will be supported by narratological analyses of best-seller fantasy novels such as those by Rowling, Martin and Meyer. Some empirical testing will be provided by readers' reviews on the *Goodreads* web community, confirming a possible connection between transmediality, narrative transportation and addiction in fantasy fiction.

**Keywords** • Fantasy Literature; Transmediality; Cognitive Science; Embodied Simulation; Extended Mind; Addiction

**Ledizioni** 

# On Fantasy's Transmediality: A Cognitive Approach

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## I. Introduction: establishing the theoretical ground

First comes the unavoidable question: what is transmediality? The answer looks easy, but it ends up being manifold: transmedial (like trans-continental, trans-sexual, et al.) is something that shifts from one medium to another. The term appeared first in 1991, referring to the distribution of franchises (such as the comic series *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*) through different media platforms (Kinder 3). But the process of its definition saw two decisive turning points in the following years. The first was in 2006, when Henry Jenkins published his influential book *Convergence Culture*, dedicating one entire chapter to *The Matrix* franchise, chosen as the archetypical representative of transmedia storytelling. In his words:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (95-96)

The second decisive step was made in 2010, when the Producers Guild of America officially recognized the role of transmedia producer in the entertainment market, thus defining the area of expertise:

A Transmedia Narrative project or franchise must consist of three (or more) narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe on any of the following platforms: Film, Television, Short Film, Broadband, Publishing, Comics, Animation, Mobile, Special Venues, DVD/Blu-ray/CD-ROM, Narrative Commercial and Marketing rollouts, and other technologies that may or may not currently exist. These narrative extensions are NOT the same as repurposing material from one platform to be cut or repurposed to different platforms. (“Code of Credits”)

The two definitions appear to be coherent, stressing the importance of an active collaboration among the different media, towards the development of a unique fictional universe. But, as shown by Gambarato, they are not sufficient for protecting the boundaries of transmediality from multiple intersections (and mergings) with similar concepts, such as inter-media, multi-media, deep media, and many others (82-83). In this regard, the strongest counterpart appears to be the concept of cross-media, which could be considered “a broader term, a more generic one, which includes the whole process of communication and interactivity” (83). But the interpretations diverge strongly. Focusing on the Italian context, only four years separate the contribution of Corrado Peperoni, who talks about cross-mediality in the same terms used by Jenkins for transmediality,<sup>1</sup> from that of Max

<sup>1</sup> “A cross-medial narration is that in which the unrolling of the tale occurs through multiple distributed channels, to create a unique—but modular, integrated and enveloping—entertainment experience, in which, at least ideally, each one of the involved media provides its specific and distinct contribution to the progress of the story” (Peperoni 41, my translation).

Giovagnoli, who reduces cross-mediality to the simple repetition of the same content on different platforms (something closer to Bolter and Grusin's remediation).<sup>2</sup>

In such a fuzzy context, the general trend seems anyway to privilege the affirmation of the term *transmedia* over *cross-media*, accompanied by a gradual expansion of its theoretical borders. On a newborn journal dedicated to the subject, Matteo Ciastellardi and Giovanna Di Rosario presented the concept of "Transmedia Literacy, an interdisciplinary, interconnected, and immersive model . . . where different media platforms, languages, and formats contribute to forming a meaningful environment for users" (9). A collective shared framework, that involves the fields of culture and entertainment, but also education and social integration. On the other hand, the expansion of the borders is already evident in the aforementioned contribution of Giovagnoli, which includes also adaptations in the context of transmediality (xvi): a phenomenon that was excluded from the definitions by both Jenkins and the Producers Guild, but that finally doesn't contradict their conceptualizations. In fact, if its strongest shortfall is redundancy, every "intersemiotic translation" is also a creative reinterpretation of a story, that necessarily modifies some of its key elements (Scolari 130). And even if the narrative framework remains unaltered, the width of the storyworld could be significantly extended by the contribution of different expressive means. Susana Tosca provides the example of the statuesque groups retelling the adventures of Ulysses, that Emperor Tiberius had placed in his villa in Sperlonga, out of the desire of "experiencing more" of the *Odyssey* (Tosca 39). And the present day offers an even more pregnant example, with the adaptation of the unfinished fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R. R. Martin, into the popular TV-series *Game of Thrones*. If the first seasons simply retold the story of the first books (offering anyway the opportunity of "experiencing more" of their fictional universe), through the years, the adaptation began to diverge more and more from the original text, providing alternative versions for its development. In the spring of 2016, then, the TV-series overcame the books (still stuck at the fifth installment, out of a scheduled total of seven), thus showing a story that had not yet been told.

In conclusion, to provide an approximate definition for transmediality, it's possible to simply focus on the tendency of a story (and of its related fictional universe) to expand through different media, constantly absorbing its consumers and stimulating their urge to "experience more" of it. A dynamics that is not so different from the one that took to the sculptural adaptations of the story of Ulysses or to the literary expansions of the Carolingian Saga, but with the slight difference that, in this era of "convergence culture," the consumers are assuming a role more and more comparable to that of the authors:<sup>3</sup> and transmediality, while still remaining a production strategy largely in the hands of the producers (or "prosumers"),<sup>4</sup> can be discerned as an intrinsic characteristic of stories themselves.

<sup>2</sup> "In the international context, the term *cross-media* is used today referring to narrative forms that involve different media but remain identical in their declinations on different platforms. *Transmedia*, instead, is used for stories that change in relation to the different media that distribute them" (Giovagnoli xvii, my translation). For the concept of remediation, see Bolter and Grusin.

<sup>3</sup> Following Jenkins, "convergence culture" takes form when the "grassroots productions" of fans and consumers assume a power comparable to that of authors and producers in generating narratives (*Convergence Culture* 18). Their definition, therefore, becomes the result of a dialectical dynamics, finally out of the direct control of the two parties involved.

<sup>4</sup> The term, first coined in the late 1970s by Alvin Toffler, suggests an interpenetration between the figures of the producer and the consumer, and was assumed through the last decades with varied interpretations. For an extended survey on the concept, see Pańkowska 4.

## 2. Fantasy literature and transmediality

Of striking evidence, is the fact that the “canon” of transmedia storytelling finds a pulsing core in movies, TV-series, comics and video games, reserving a lesser relevance to literary productions.<sup>5</sup> But, at least, with one significant exception. The two “urtexts” for transmediality can be respectively identified in *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*,<sup>6</sup> both originally produced for the big screen, while recent studies have been dedicated to the dynamics of “transmedia television,” focusing on TV-series such as *Lost*, *24*, *Heroes* and *Alias*.<sup>7</sup> In this growing constellation, that includes also video games like *Assassin's Creed* and *World of Warcraft*, or comics like *Iron Man* (which generated the expanding phenomenon of *The Marvel Cinematic Universe*), the only books are titles such as *Harry Potter*, *The Twilight Saga* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*,<sup>8</sup> all relating to the literary genre known as *fantasy*.

The circumstance appears fraught with consequences, because it suggests how transmediality can be directly connected to a specific literary genre, confirming that the conditions for its emergence go well beyond the characteristics of an individual text.

Anyway, the problems arise once again when trying to define this specific literary genre. In a recent guide on the subject, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn used the image of the “fuzzy set” (1) for describing the phenomenon, suggesting the idea of its irreducibility to a single formula. But for the purposes of the present study, the most fitting definition appears to be the one by René Schalleger, that efficiently synthesizes a complex interrelation between narratological aspects, affective reactions and social dynamics:

<sup>5</sup> Dowd *et al.* provide some possible explanations for the scarce transmediality of literary productions: “The novel has always inherently had the ability to hold a story universe. . . . Note, however, that novels, and especially novel series, tend to have very dense and detailed story universes. It can be difficult to produce an expression of a dense novel story universe in a narratively ‘simpler’ medium such as motion picture or television. . . . No medium surpasses the novel’s ability to reveal the interior of human mind. . . . That said, novels that are built around the expression of the internal thinking of the characters may be difficult to express in other media. . . . The dynamics of words and actions has always been a challenge with some amazing results. . . . The dynamics of words describing actions, however has never been a perfect one and has faced new challenges as other media emerged with the ability to imagine and express unfettered by the limitations of words on a page” (202).

<sup>6</sup> Regarding *The Matrix*, see the aforementioned Jenkins, who analyzes the intersections of the movie plot with video games, comics and anime (*Convergence Culture* 93-130). “The business case for going transmedia grows even stronger when you look at long-running entertainment empires like *Star Wars*. The history of the *Star Wars* universe now plays out through hundreds of films, books, and comics; an animated TV series; and video games. As the appeal and the cultural resonance of *Star Wars* became more soundly established, Lucasfilm was able to use its intellectual property to license or create products ranging from action figures and playsets to sheets, swimsuits, and even Pez dispensers” (Phillips 42).

<sup>7</sup> See Clarke.

<sup>8</sup> Following Giovagnoli, *Harry Potter* was at the heart of the “second wave” of transmedia storytelling, originating a dynamics similar to that of *Star Wars* (xxi); *Twilight* expanded itself not only through a series of successful movies, but also through the “unhortodox spin-off” *Fifty Shades of Grey* (64-65); and *Game of Thrones*, while adapting a novel series for television, was supported by a transmedia marketing campaign known as the Maester’s Path, which combined online games, mobile applications, and a set of gadgets that leveraged on the organs of perception, offering a “taste” of the fictional world of Westeros (123-125).

Fantasy is a genre constantly oscillating between open mode and static formula that establishes impossible Secondary Worlds and from these creates Secondary Belief to inspire concrete affective reactions to the abstract ideas presented. (34-35)

At least three dominant references can be individuated in this synthetic definition. First, the idea that fantasy, especially in its most recent developments, is something suspended between a simple market formula and a complex investigation of the concept of reality. As shown by Brian Attebery, its theoretical depth can reach the highest levels of significance, while its literary value can remain that of a para-literary production (293-309). The expressions “Secondary Worlds” and “Secondary Belief,” then, are a clear reference to John R. R. Tolkien, author not only of the novel (*The Lord of the Rings*) that originated the global phenomenon of fantasy, but also of the essay (*On Fairy-Stories*) that cast its theoretical ground. According to Tolkien, a good fantasy author “proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter” (132). And it’s finally to this cognitive involvement that Schalleger alludes, recalling a dynamics minutely described by Gary Wolfe: through eight sequential steps, the encounter with fantasy progresses from an initial “*cognition of the impossible*,” where the ground rules of the “Secondary World” are coherently defined, developing through stages such as an “*awareness of affective significance*” and an “*awareness of cognitive significance*,” in order to reach a final “*deeper belief*, which permits certain fantasy works to become analogues of inner experience virtually as valid as events in the ‘real world’” (79).

On this simple theoretical ground, it’s already possible to elaborate some tentative explanations for the peculiar tendency of fantasy towards transmediality.<sup>9</sup> As evidenced by Franco Ressa, Tolkien can be considered more like a “maieutical” author than like a demiurge (23). Referring to the extensive appendixes of *The Lord of the Rings*, where the genealogies of the kings and the chronology of the Middle Earth are meticulously described, the work of Tolkien can be interpreted as an invitation to fulfill its own potentialities. The novel is not the final stage of the narrative creation, but becomes the skeleton for further expansions, left entirely in the hands of its readers. Readers that, usually, are equipped with all the necessary tools for the task, starting from the characteristic maps that accompany most of the novels.<sup>10</sup> And it’s naturally consequential, for example, that the global phenomenon of the role-playing games was generated precisely in the context of fantasy fiction. Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax never admitted a direct influence of Tolkien’s work, but their *Dungeons & Dragons* (published in 1974 and destined to become a worldwide success), was not simply inspired by *The Lord of the Rings*, but dangerously close to plagiarize its contents. And Jon Peterson saw in their creation one of the most effective realizations of fantasy’s intrinsic potentialities: a realization so powerful, that took most of its players to prefer it over the books (201). Through the role-playing games, fantasy enthusiasts found the opportunity to actively explore its “Secondary Worlds,” thus accomplishing one of its earliest transmedial expansions: from book to game, from imagination to interaction.

The first decisive intersection between fantasy and transmediality, hence, can be individuated in the general concept of worldbuilding. Because while “transmedia storytelling is the art of world making” (Jenkins, *Convergent Culture* 21), fantasy novels already incite

<sup>9</sup> According to Colin Harvey, fantasy and science fiction are the two predominant genres in transmedia storytelling, due to historical reasons, but also to their intrinsic characteristics (40-62).

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive analysis of the role and characteristics of maps in fantasy fiction, see Ekman. Anne Besson notes how the use of maps, together with seriality, attests the expansive tension inherent to fantasy (95).

the mental creation of an alternative reality, extensively defined in its most minute details and thus open to an active exploration. Fantasy, in short, seems to be the best fitting literary ground for any transmedial expansion. And the reasons for this suitability are not only in its theoretical definition, but also in the cognitive dynamics to which it gives rise.

### 3. The transmedial pull, in the light of cognitive science

In Vittorio Gallese's influential definition, every act of interpretation can be (also) interpreted in terms of an "embodied simulation":

The motor system, together with its connections to visceromotor and somatosensory cortical areas, structures action execution and action perception, action imitation and imagination. When the action is executed or imitated, the cortico-spinal pathway is activated, leading to movement. When the action is observed or imagined, its actual execution is inhibited. The cortical motor network is activated, however, not in all of its components and not with the same intensity: action is not produced, it is only simulated. (2954)

A peculiar type of simulation, then, is the one that happens with aesthetic experience. Gallese and Wojciehowski called it "liberated embodied simulation" (19), emphasizing the fact that, when reading a book, watching a movie, or assisting to a play at theater, our body is at rest and our mind is scarcely distracted by contingencies, so an extensive amount of cognitive resources can be freely dedicated to inner simulation. The most relevant consequence is a more pervasive immersion in the fictional world, that takes shape through an active (virtual) exploration: "Our pleasure in novel reading is thus likely also driven by this sense of safe intimacy with a world we not only imagine, but also literally embody" (20).

Embodied simulation seems to be naturally paired with spatialization, and the importance of space in cognitively-supported narratology has been particularly emphasized by David Herman. In an article published in 2001, he evidenced how "telling a story necessitates modelling, and enabling others to model, an emergent constellation of spatially related entities" (534). In short, while action remains an inalienable ingredient of storytelling, space assumes a growing role, moving from the borders (context, landscape and background) to the centre of the theoretical field: in Herman's interpretation, "narrative allows people to build spaces in which to think, act, and talk" (536). An idea that recalls immediately the "worldbuilding" of transmedia projects and fantasy novels, suggesting how one of the biggest goals for their creators is indeed a fundamental function of narrative itself.

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, for example, spatiality plays a crucial role: its fictional world is subdivided into areas where climatic conditions (subject to mysterious supernatural forces) appear as almost invariable. This strict subdivision stresses a general sense of fragmentariness, when the focus of the narration shifts from one point to another on the map. But the final objective is indeed that of overcoming this fragmentariness, and the reader is frequently invited to connect the dots, forming in his mind a comprehensive vision of that world. The developers of *Game of Thrones* saw immediately this potentiality in Martin's novels, and exploited it already in the title sequence, which can be considered as a transmedial adaptation of the maps that appear in the books. Through an extensive use of computer graphics, the map is animated and actively explored by the camera, bringing the viewers directly inside its constitutive logic, and gradually unveiling new parts of it. But while maps and title sequences incite this hyperbolic flight through the continents, the contents of books and episodes drastically shrink the focalization on the single characters,

facilitating an embodied simulation of their fantastic world. It's the technique of the "points of view," through which Martin builds each chapter on the perceptions of a single character: a technique that, while impossible to translate directly on the screen, clearly influences its *mise-en-scène*, characterized by a strong fragmentariness and particularly focused on corporality (not unusually trespassing into obscenity and brutality).

But this narrowing of the focalization finds its extreme results in *Twilight*, the fantasy series—or, to be more accurate, the paranormal romance—written by Stephenie Meyer. Here, the forbidden love story between the human Bella Swan and the vampire Edward Cullen is entirely narrated from the point of view of the female protagonist (with the exception of a few chapters in the last books of the series). Bella's monologues are frequently replicated in the cinematographic adaptations, but the strongest transmedial expansion seems to come from the re-writings operated by fans, through the phenomenon known as *fanfiction*. As well known, the *Twilight*-based fanfiction *Master of the Universe* evolved into another global best-seller, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. And E. L. James's novel originated in its turn a further transmedial development, with cinematographic adaptations, sex-themed excursions and bondage seminars (Giovagnoli 64). Clearly, the focus shifted from fantasy to eroticism, but not every fanfiction operated this kind of alteration. It's interesting to notice, for example, that many alternative tales that appeared on the popular website *FanFiction.net* simply retell *Twilight*'s plot from different points of view. "Twilight in Alice's POV," by ZanessaLover247, chooses that of Alice Cullen, sister of Edward, simply because "I would LOVE to be Bella, but Alice is amazing too." "The Twilight Saga: Esme's POV," by dogsrplayful, shifts to Esme Cullen, "wife of the gorgeous Dr. Charlisle Cullen," adoptive father of Edward. And obviously the stories told from Edward's point of view abound, starting from a projected novel by Meyer herself. This pull towards a multiplicity of perspectives seems to reflect one of the most important aspects of transmediality. Following Henry Jenkins:

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. ("Transmedia Storytelling" 101)

The choice of Bella's point of view, while offering a perfect vehicle for the absorption into *Twilight*'s fictional world, seems to impede an effective transmedial expansion. But it's precisely through the active intervention of the fans, that this world finally deploys its intrinsic potentialities, assuming a narrative style more and more similar to that of *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

The consequences of the fandom are even more impressive in the case of *Harry Potter*, that gave rise to some of the most structured phenomena, leveraging on the identification of young students from all around the world with the young wizards of the fantastic school of Hogwarts. These complex constructions, ranging from themed summer camps to fictional diaries and newspapers, worked towards a restructuring of reality as much extravagant, as creative and original, simply actualizing a stimulus hidden at the heart of J. K. Rowling's novels. As evidenced by Stefano Calabrese, the overabundance of magical elements in *Harry Potter* incites the reader to "*mentalize* in sophisticated ways the fictional world" (1700), finally improving his/her cognitive skills, because dealing with logics that are strongly different from those of everyday life (1580).

Through embodiment and worldbuilding, in conclusion, fantasy seems not only to naturally tend towards transmediality, but also to fulfill some of the highest potentialities

of narrative itself. All this, of course, with some determinant limitations: and the field of cognitive science offers also a hint of the possible negative consequences of this phenomenon.

#### 4. On the dark side, from extension to addiction

The concept of transmediality, paired with the peculiar dynamics of fantasy worldbuilding, suggests a reference to the theory of the *extended mind*. In Clark's and Chalmers's influential paper, in fact, cognitive extension was presented in relation to a spatial issue. The example of Otto and Inga was about the individuation of the Museum of Modern Art in New York: if Inga instantly recalls its localization, Otto is supposedly suffering from Alzheimer disease, so he has to retrieve the information from his notebook, where he knows he will find it. In Clark's and Chalmers's interpretation, Otto's notebook "plays the role usually played by a biological memory" (12), leading to the conclusion that "part of the world *is* . . . part of the cognitive process. Cognitive processes ain't (all) in the head!" (8). This hypothesis, while strongly opposed by numerous philosophers and scientists, saw an increasing success in the last years, especially when confronted with the possibilities offered by technological development.<sup>11</sup> In relation with fantasy and transmediality, extended mind can be useful to understand the effects of any imaginative task that requires an overabundant externalization of the cognitive process: in fact, while fantasy incites a massive imaginative effort, it also demands extensive supports on which to be developed. That is demonstrated by transmediality itself: the use of maps, gadgets and graphic arts, together with the aforementioned chronologies and genealogies, attests how worldbuilding, in fantasy fiction, is something that cannot be accomplished only through narration. And that is also, probably, one of the reasons why fantasy is so successful today. The fascination with the world of *Game of Thrones*, so fragmented and devoid of reliable means of communication, comes not only from its contrast with the hyper-connection of the present world, but also—and especially—from the possibility of exploring it through its most advanced technologies.<sup>12</sup> A possibility that also implies one of the most subtle dangers, because active exploration becomes gradually a passive experience. In this context, extended mind helps understanding how, while our cognitive skills are gradually supplanted by technology (e.g. smartphones: see Barr et al.), also our imagination could be saturated by transmedia fantasy. As noted by Peperoni, in fact, the creative process of transmediality leans on an apparent contradiction: if, to be conceived, it necessitates a general openness of the narrative, on the other hand, in the phase of realization, it tends to fill all the gaps (80). A perfect transmedia narration, thus, is not an open one, but the one that satisfies its consumers by providing every possible digression and ramification in its most accomplished form, making its exploration ideally inexhaustible. But on the other side of this scenario, is the fact that the perfect consumer of a transmedia narration should be the one that never feels the urge to get out of it, becoming completely addicted to its fictional world.

One of the most recent topics in the field of psychopathology, is that of the so-called "maladaptive daydreamers." Starting from the contribution of Bigelsen and Schupak in 2011, that reported the testimonies of 90 self-identified "addictive daydreamers" (1634),

<sup>11</sup> Among the most recent contributions, see for example Whitaker, Chorley and Allen, who interpret the extended mind in terms of the Web 2.0.

<sup>12</sup> Consider for example the websites that approach its geography through the technology of *Google Earth*: see theMountainGoat.



the problem has been recently studied in more detail, with a sample of 447 participants and with the definition of a more refined method of analysis (Bigelsen et al.). Maladaptive daydreamers are those people who report an excessive absorption in highly-structured fantasies, finally experiencing a strong distress by what appears to be a form of addiction. But the phenomenon is still lacking an official definition, while some neuroscientific proofs seem to support its actual existence.<sup>13</sup> And it is significant to notice how maladaptive daydreamers, while rarely referring to fantasy and transmedia, carry out a dynamics of worldbuilding that is strongly similar to those described above. See for example this testimony, reported by Bigelsen et al.:

My daydreams are based on a TV show I saw when I was 10. Imagine a television show that kept getting renewed year after year for 30 years. Think of all the experiences you would have watched the characters go through. That is what my mind has been doing for over 30 years. I do not feel like there is any way to possibly describe how in-depth it all is. There have been times I have been caught up in the daydream for entire days. (254)

Another significant aspect of this research, is the fact that it excludes any possible trauma or deficiency as a primary cause for the phenomenon (264). Maladaptive daydreamers are healthy people who live a normal life, but who have developed a ‘hobby’ (fantasizing about imaginary people, worlds, or situations) which has gradually become an actual addiction. And maybe the difficulty in defining it as a pathology depends on the ordinariness of its primary vehicle: that is fantasy itself. In this respect, an effective analogy is suggested once again by transmediality. When trying to explain the nature of the “transmedial desire” that lies in everyone of us, Susana Tosca proposed the example of the children that build a Lego Smurf village in their living room, expanding it every day with new stories and characters, till their mother decides to dismantle it, invoking a return to real life (35). Maladaptive daydreamers have never dismantled their Smurf village, and got stuck into it. But the origin for their addiction is not so different from a children’s pretend play, that is something natural and experienced by almost everybody. Maladaptive daydreamers, in short, seem to be the victims of a tendency that is part of human nature, but that necessitates some form of control or inhibition, before overcoming intentionality and giving rise to an addictive process.

Transmedia producers and fantasy authors play an insidious role—but also, a possibly salvific one—in this scenario. On the one hand, they offer a relief, an escape valve for any excessive tendency towards daydreaming, through a solution that appears more socially acceptable; on the other hand, they build their efficiency on the same dynamics of addiction, thus stimulating that tendency also in people that don’t have any evident issue in dealing with their imagination. In fact, nothing can definitely prove if transmedia projects and fantasy novels are a detriment or an improvement for the minds of their consumers, but some empirical data can at least direct the research towards a possible line of interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> In a research by Malia Mason, a maladaptive daydreamer underwent a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) while fantasizing, showing “great activity in the ventral striatum, the part of the brain that lights up when an alcoholic is shown images of a martini” (Bigelsen and Kelley).

## 5. From theory to analysis: preliminary results

To provide some empirical testing of the theories presented above, the analysis has been directed towards readers' responses to fantasy novels, focusing on the following questions: (1) Are fantasy readers interested in a transmedial expansion of the narrative? (2) Are fantasy readers attesting a strong involvement/transportation in the fictional world? (3) Are fantasy readers confessing an addictive relationship with the novels? (4) Do readers' responses evidence particular signs of creativity or critical depth, thus suggesting (while not demonstrating) a positive influence of fantasy on cognitive skills?

The novels corpus has been defined through the intersection of two separate methodologies, pairing the "collective intelligence" of web communities (qualitative method) with the big data of the editorial market (quantitative method). Hence, the basis for the selection have been the two lists "Best Fantasy Books of the 21st Century" and "Best Paranormal Romance Series,"<sup>14</sup> published on the *Goodreads* website, and determined by the votes of the Web community. Among the 200 titles thus individuated (the first 100 for each list), a further selection has been operated through the number of appearances of each title on the "USA Today Best-Selling Books" list, that presents every week the 150 most-sold books in the United States. Considering that the majority of the titles is part of a narrative cycle, the process has brought to the selection of the following six series: *Harry Potter*, by J. K. Rowling (7 books, published between 1997 and 2007); *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, by Rick Riordan (5 books, published between 2005 and 2009); *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R. R. Martin (5 books out of 7, published between 1996 and 2011); *The Inheritance Cycle*, by Christopher Paolini (4 books, published between 2002 and 2011); *The Twilight Saga*, by Stephenie Meyer (4 books, published between 2005 and 2008); *The Mortal Instruments*, by Cassandra Clare (6 books, published between 2007 and 2014).<sup>15</sup> It is significant to notice that each of the six series has been already adapted for cinema or television (but also through video games, role-playing games, fanfiction, et al.), preliminarily confirming the strong connection between fantasy and transmediality.

The selection of reader responses has been operated once again through the *Goodreads* website.<sup>16</sup> In order to reduce the specimen to a manageable size, the analysis has been

<sup>14</sup> The insertion has been necessary because of the exclusion of *The Twilight Saga* from the first list. But, as demonstrated by Calabrese (1715-1809), the series by Stephenie Meyer is indeed a determinant title for the fantasy genre.

<sup>15</sup> These are the detailed results (updated to November 2015), where the number following each title indicates the number of weeks spent on the *USA Today* list: J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter* 731 (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 81; *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* 137; *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 193; *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* 275); Rick Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* 686 (*The Lightning Thief* 206; *The Last Olympian* 114; *The Sea of Monsters* 118; *The Titan's Curse* 109; *Percy Jackson and the Olympians Boxed Set* 12; *The Battle of the Labyrinth* 127); George R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire* 358 (*A Storm of Swords* 103; *A Feast for Crows* 99; *A Dance with Dragons* 156); Christopher Paolini, *The Inheritance Cycle* 297 (*Eragon* 181; *Eldest* 85; *Brisinger* 31); Stephenie Meyer, *The Twilight Saga* 223 (*Twilight* 223); Cassandra Clare, *The Mortal Instruments* 186 (*City of Bones* 95; *City of Glass* 38; *City of Ashes* 53).

<sup>16</sup> It is necessary to acknowledge that, from a cognitive point of view, the following analysis cannot reach a full reliability, because based on the free declarations of readers, and not on results obtained through an experiment in a controlled environment. But, as evidenced by Bigelsen and Schupak, this type of analysis is fundamental in providing a preliminary description of a not-yet-explored

carried out only for the most-sold title of each series, focusing on the first 100 positive reviews,<sup>17</sup> and thus forming a total corpus of 600 reviews.

In relation to question (1), at least 95 reviewers made explicit references to transmediality: by comparing the books with movies and TV-series; by using images taken from them for supporting their opinions; by expressing their interest towards an upcoming adaptation or towards any possible transmedial expansion. Among the series, *Twilight* was the one that totalized the highest result, with 23 reviews out of 100 referring to different media. But 11 of them expressed a clearly negative judgment: according to Sparrow,<sup>18</sup> “the movie version of *Twilight* is so freaking boring and awkward,” while for April “the movies ruined everything.” Anyway, some reviewers appreciated them, or even preferred them over the books, like for example Adita The Relentless Insomniac, who, after admitting that she has watched the first movie “a gazillion times,” concludes “that the movie adaptations are always better off, because we get to see the characters for real- in flesh and blood.” Of a peculiar interest, then, is the review by Victoria HannaHannaH, who suggests to read some fanfictions instead, “as a temporary fix while waiting for Stephenie Meyer’s future books.” The movies assume an even more determinant role in the case of *Harry Potter* (with only 4 negative opinions out of 19), and Susan comes to admit that it is “impossible to discuss the books without referencing the films.” The only cinematographic adaptation on which almost all the reviews are negative (13 out of 15) is that of *Percy Jackson*. A similar reception is also reserved to the first (and only) film taken from *The Inheritance Cycle*. But the negative opinions are only 7 out of 13, because the remaining six talk in enthusiastic terms of further transmedial expansions, such as audio books and graphic arts. According to Gehna, “[t]he cover is one of my favourite elements in the book. The sapphire eyes of the dragon look fierce and dangerous, as if ready to attack.” A great expectation (but also 3 disappointments out of 13) surrounds the movie adaptation of *City of Bones*, first installment of *The Mortal Instruments*: the movie playbill appears multiple times, and one reviewer goes through an extensive panorama of the casting (the movie was finally released in August 2013). And particularly significant is the review that, after an allusion to the homosexual relationship between two characters (Magnus and Alec), publishes a Yaoi Manga representation of the two, accompanied by the motto: “Keep calm and love Malec” (Lola Reviewer). To conclude this brief survey, a general approval (11 out of 12) comes with the television adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, with reasons similar to those expressed by Victoria HannaHannaH regarding *The Twilight Saga*. After having finished the last installment of the series, Connie admits: “I can’t believe that I’m cut off from this world until the next book comes out... Time to start the TV show I think!” And the transmedial pull is even more evident in the testimony of Damian Dubois, who confesses, referring to one of the most disturbing episodes in the books: “As sad as it is I can’t wait to see the depiction [in the TV-series] of the Red Wedding.”

In relation to question (2), the numbers are even higher, with a total of 103 reviewers referring to worldbuilding and narrative transportation. The highest results are provided by

phenomenon (1635), while, in this particular case, it can also profit of the large number of testimonies freely available on the Web.

<sup>17</sup> The reviews of each book have been ordered through the function “default” of the website (that selects, using a undisclosed algorithm, the most relevant reviews). The choice has been limited to English texts with a “5 stars” rating (equal to: “amazing”), thus favoring the readers that showed a more sympathetic response to the narrative. The results are updated to June 2016.

<sup>18</sup> From here on, I’ll simply refer to the nicknames of the reviewers: all the details can be found in the bibliography. Considering their (usually) fictive nature, I’ve chosen to quote them in their complete form, not distinguishing names from surnames in the alphabetical sorting.

*The Inheritance Cycle*, with 27 reviews referring to Christopher Paolini's ability in depicting the world of Alagaësia. According to Kerry (The Roaming Librarian), "[t]he world Paulini [*sic*] has created is palpable, and beautiful in its description," while Annie admits that "[t]he setting never fails to draw me in." But worldbuilding is not the only vehicle for narrative transportation: Henry Austin, for example, praises the "sensory details that make it seem as if you are in the story, seeing what Eragon [the protagonist] sees, smelling what Eragon smells." A form of involvement that clearly refers to the dynamics of embodied simulation, focusing on the perceptions of individual characters. Similar testimonies appear for *The Mortal Instruments* (which ranks at the second place, with 22 reviews) and for *A Song of Ice and Fire* (third, with 16 reviews). As already evidenced, the violent corporality of George R. R. Martin's creation incites even more colorful reactions: Becky felt "physically hurt when bad things happen[ed]," and Edward Rathke synthesizes the experience by telling that "[t]he fantastic world he's created is just as real as our own, maybe even realer." Following at the fourth and fifth place, are *Percy Jackson* (15 reviews) and *Twilight* (13 reviews), both of them with a dominance of the identification with characters: the use of first-person narrative left Vicky with the feeling "that Percy was actually talking to me," while numerous are the readers that identified themselves with Bella, the protagonist and narrator of *Twilight*. And once again, according to Noells, this happens with a determinant support of physical sensations: "the reader can SMELL the wet, ancient moss of the foggy trees of the Pacific Northwest, the reader can FEEL the warmth that Bella feels when she get in her old truck." Curiously enough, *Harry Potter* places the last, with only 10 reviewers referring to the experience of being transported into the fantastic castle of Hogwarts.

Regarding question (3), the reviewers admitting some sort of addiction<sup>19</sup> are a little fewer, but not less than 92. *The Mortal Instruments* comes first, with 25 reviewers referring to various enchantments, spells and obsessions that kept them reading and re-reading the books over and over again. Holly declares that she "physically could not put it down," while, according to Noha Badawi, "[y]ou will find yourself wrapped up in this world and you won't want to get out." The readers of *Twilight* (for a total of 21) ironically refer to drugs in describing the effects of the books. Laura Keitzer suggests that "Little Brown put crack between the pages," and Anne compares the series to "fair food": "[y]ou know you shouldn't want to eat that stuff . . . but you eat it anyway." But here comes also a decisive distinction, because at least 12 of these reviewers talk about an addiction driven by characters (in particular by the vampire Edward, who "bewitches" many female readers), and not by their storyworld. Fantasy, therefore, seems to play a secondary role, finally confirming Bigelsen and Schupak's assumption, that the two dominant typologies of addictive daydreaming are "character-driven" and "aspirational self-oriented" (41): namely, the identification with Bella, and the possibility of being loved by Edward. In the case of *Twilight*, then (and, to a lesser extent, also in *The Mortal Instruments*), the romance element plays an even more relevant role in the dynamics of addiction. *The Inheritance Cycle* reaches the third position (with 19 reviews), shifting back the focus on fantasy worldbuilding (while confirming the importance of the identification with the protagonist): Nicole is explicit in telling that she "would happily day dream [her]self into that world."

<sup>19</sup> The nature of the question imposes some clarifications about the sorting method here adopted. A positive score has not been assigned to reviews that allude to the impossibility of interrupting the reading (because referable to the general dynamics of narrative transportation), but only to those that express the need for experiencing more (i.e., reading another book of the series, watching the movie, etc.), or that express it with an explicit reference to a physiological drive, a dependency, etc. Anyway, as the following examples will demonstrate, a small margin of uncertainty can still persist.

And *A Song of Ice and Fire* (with 13 reviews) presents a similar phenomenology. Susie admits that her first thought after having finished the fifth installment of the series was: “how do I get back in?” A desire that, for the already quoted Connie, was the first reason for starting watching the TV-series. To conclude, in the last two positions, are *Percy Jackson* (9 reviews) and, once again, *Harry Potter* (5 reviews).

The data gathered through those three questions confirm the existence of a possible connection between transmediality, narrative transportation and addiction in fantasy fiction. Because, while the groups of reviews offering a positive match never perfectly overlap, the proportions are strikingly similar: 15.8% for question (1), 17.2% for question (2), and 15.3% for question (3).

Finding a unique answer to question (4) is a more complex task, because it requires a purely qualitative analysis of the reviews. But, at least, it could indicate some possible directions of research, in envisioning the positive effects of fantasy and transmediality. For example, it's particularly significant that *Harry Potter*, while obtaining low results for questions (2) and (3), can count some original reviews—or, at least, highly unorthodox. Hira apologizes for her “lame review,” which obtained nevertheless 259 “likes” on the Web community. In fact, her text is a composition of GIFs (animated images) showing her reactions to the narrative, in a very communicative and “transmedial” way. And numerous are the reviews of *Harry Potter* that use images taken from the films with an ironic approach, while not criticizing them. Transmediality, thus, seems to be used in a creative way, in a fictional context that generates lower effects in terms of involvement or addiction. But also *Twilight*, one of the most “addictive” series in the sample, originated some interesting reviews, not devoid of critical depth (when dealing with subjects such as feminism, religion and sexuality): referring to transmediality, Sparrow writes some ironic suggestions, such as “planning to petition Tim Burton to do a song-and-dance version of the *Twilight* movie,” while Brad profits of the occasion for proposing an improbable fanfiction, “[b]ased on the glorious Book of Enos from the holy Book of Mormon.” Irony can easily shift to sarcasm, but it opens the most interesting scenarios in terms of transmedial expansion, when freed from the strict boundaries of the fantasy worlds, and able to creatively play with their constitutive rules.

## 6. Conclusion

The tentative answer to the last question suggests how further research should be devoted to contexts where free creation is paired with transmedial expansion. When coping with addictive dynamics, a phenomenon like that of fanfiction, for example, represents a perfect actualization of the “convergence” envisioned by Henry Jenkins. Fanfiction authors are usually readers strongly involved in a fictional universe, who find a way to externalize their personal obsession, assuming a direct control and—most importantly—using it for creating a form of communication, not anymore enclosed in the self-referential sphere of daydreaming and pretend play (Barnes 72). If one of the greatest dangers of transmediality is passivity, fanfiction offers a way for contrasting it through the most simple and archetypal medium—that is literary creation itself, in its broader sense. The connection between fantasy and fanfiction is demonstrated by the fact that, on the popular website *FanFiction.net*, seven of the top-ten books rewritten by fans are in fact classics of the

genre.<sup>20</sup> Numerous studies have been devoted to the subject,<sup>21</sup> but an extensive analysis of the phenomenon from a cognitive point of view is still in progress.

And fanfiction does not exhaust the possible ways of escape from the detrimental trends of transmediality. Another popular example in recent years is represented by the TV-series *Mad Men*, that found an unauthorized expansion through the Twitter profiles created by some fans, who impersonated the protagonists of the series. If the producers, at first, contrasted the phenomenon, they finally embraced it as an opportunity, transforming their product in a transmedia project. As stated by Frank Rose:

In a command-and-control world, we know who's telling the story; it's the author. But digital media have created an authorship crisis. Once the audience is free to step out of the fiction and start directing events, the entire edifice of twentieth-century mass media begins to crumble. (83)

With *Mad Men*, a TV-series was extended through a Social Network, but the possibilities of transmedial expansion, in a world so permeated by ever-evolving media, are ideally inexhaustible. And this could be the perfect opportunity for the consumers to finally take control, overcoming the dangers of a mass culture that is gradually becoming a simple (and addictive) entertainment market, to actualize the not-so-utopian ideal of the "convergence culture," where new forms of narratives (extensible, participatory, and 'lifelike') could finally take shape.

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<sup>20</sup> These are the numbers that appear on the website: "Harry Potter (744K) Twilight (218K) Percy Jackson and the Olympians (68.4K) Lord of the Rings (54.9K) Hunger Games (44.7K) Warriors (23.9K) Maximum Ride (17.7K) Mortal Instruments (16.3K) Hobbit (11.9K) Chronicles of Narnia (11.8K)" ("Books").

<sup>21</sup> Regarding *Harry Potter*, see Thomas.

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