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THE MESSAGE IS transmedi@

You've heard all about multimedia, but what in the name of all that's digital is transmedia – and what are the reasons for the excitement behind it? JEREMY PAYNE went along to a symposium at HKDI with a mission to find out from this discipline's leading lights.

Transmedia is a new buzzword but the principles behind it go back decades. Arguably, Disney was one of the first proponents of transmedia by creating storybooks, toy characters and board games to enhance the appeal and ubiquity of its films. Consider the *Star Wars* franchise; the toy figures, model spaceships and spin-off Boba Fett cartoons (and soon to be a new Hollywood movie) all contribute to a whole that is undoubtedly greater than the sum of its parts, a completely coherent alternative universe and timeline. But today, from movies to marketing, we're seeing more and more content creators adopting transmedia practices: creating stories, characters or themes that arc over various platforms, providing consumers with multiple entry points – and deeper product engagement. After all, transmedia responds to cultural shifts not with a passive reception of content but through interactive and participatory storytelling.

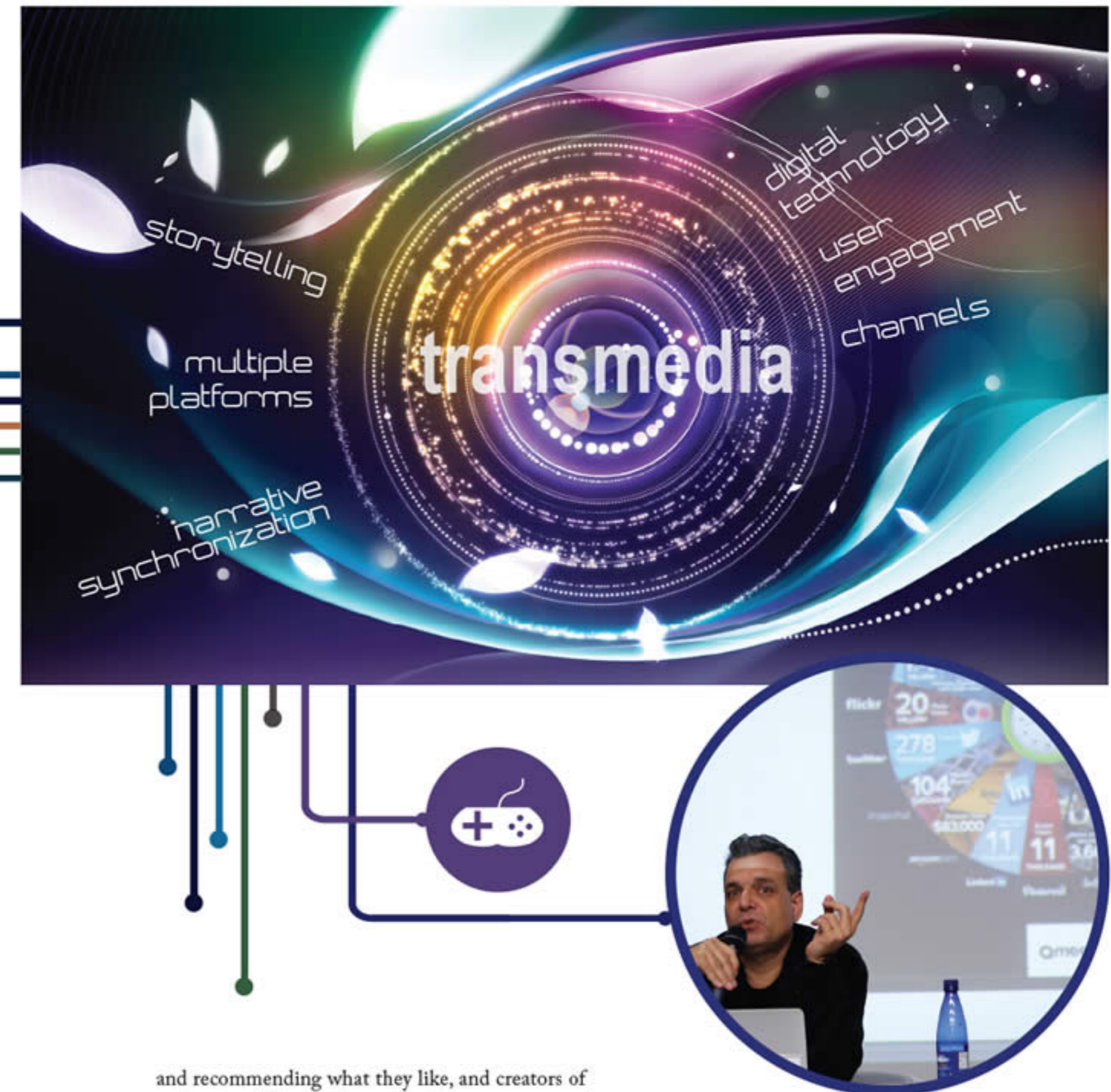
Typically, a transmedia initiative could include film, video, online, numerous social media platforms – and even have staged “real” live action events. This mosaic of separate disciplines can create not just a bigger picture but a richer, more personalised experience for consumers. For marketers, transmedia presents

a new opportunity for engaging audiences at a less superficial level – with potential to enhance brand mythology and create more brand evangelists.

The origin of the word transmedia is generally regarded to date back to 2003, when it was coined by Professor Henry Jenkins of the University of Southern California. He described transmedia stories as those which “unfold across multiple media platforms with each new element making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole”.

But how has this phenomenon crystallised and why is it relevant now? You just need to understand why, in the digital age, conventional advertising and marketing solutions are losing the ability to genuinely stand out. People have access to such an abundance of content that they are filtering or skipping commercial messages. Except, of course, the things they are passionate about.

They are consuming media through multiple platforms: phones, tablets, apps, TV and blogs – and their attention span is becoming increasingly fragmented and short. At the same time, those same audiences who used to just be consumers are now acting as curators through social media, commenting



and recommending what they like, and creators of content – adding to the content they consume and creating non-linear story worlds that grow through their personal participation.

But why is this trend emerging right now and why is it suddenly on the radar for marketers and students? Quite simply, transmedia is still in its infancy – it's an undiscovered country somewhere between digital media and film (yet including both disciplines), and that's what makes it so attractive to creative individuals and marketing professionals alike.

This is why, in January 2014, HKDI sponsored the first transmedia seminar in Hong Kong, and almost the first in the Greater China region. Attended by luminaries from marketing departments of big brand names such as Apple, Lane Crawford, Universal

Music, TVB News, Maxim's and agencies such as JWT, PixoPunch and PacificLink, the event provided a mouth-watering taste of transmedia possibilities.

Vladan Nikolic, Associate Professor of Media Studies and Film at The New School in New York, and Rong Sheng, Transmedia Consultant from Leaven Media in Shanghai gave the January keynote seminars. Nikolic is something of a pioneer in the field, as creator of the 2010 dystopian psychological thriller *Zenith*, which utilised film, video, online and an Alternate Reality game to take forward the labyrinthine plot and a BitTorrent promotion for distribution. Rong Sheng impressed the audience



« THIS FIELD IS STILL NOT ESTABLISHED – SO IT’S ABSOLUTELY THE RIGHT TIME TO GET INVOLVED. »

with her emphasis on making the digital interaction as user-friendly as possible, and creating bespoke solutions for consumers of all ages.

The focus of the January seminar was transmedia in the commercial world. Drawing examples from major brands worldwide who are active in the field such as Coca Cola, Tao Bao and Autoliberté from France, it’s apparent that a major new discipline is emerging, and gathering momentum fast. Similar sentiments were expressed at the March 2014 Transmedia Seminar at HKDI, given by Anita Ondine of Transmedia Next, who operates in the UK, US and across Asia.

She stressed that although regions where transmedia had developed fastest were Europe and the US, Hong Kong is a particularly fertile prospect. With a highly educated and tech-savvy workforce plus a long tradition of high-quality publishing and storytelling, the ground is ideally-prepared for both creativity and commercial growth. Says Ondine, “This is the next wave of how stories get told, using media that are more relevant to today’s societies. There has been a shift from passive experiences such as film and TV to the new participatory ones. In film, stories have become just ‘content’; however, transmedia brings stories back to the people themselves, and they become active participants.” With the ability to integrate locational awareness, gaming and numerous other digital assets, the ability to create immersive experiences in stories and

brands sets up endless possibilities.

There is little doubt that Ondine sees HKDI’s position in the development of this field as central. “I applaud HKDI’s decision to take a leadership role in this new medium – it’s essential that a major organisation establishes itself and takes responsibility for the educational resources that are required.” This is a commitment that could pay rich dividends to the territory, “Hong Kong has the ability to leapfrog the rest of Asia, who have not been as quick as the West to pick up on the possibilities of this new medium.”

To this end Terence Wong, Head of Department for Communication Design and Digital Media at HKDI, made an exploratory trip to New York to check out the transmedia scene at the epicentre of design innovation. He met with executives from MTV, who showed how transmedia was being used to promote upcoming episodes of blockbuster TV series and also exchanged experiences with the academic staff at Parsons in Greenwich Village. In the autumn, the top-ranked design institute in New York will have

PREVIOUS PAGE VLADAN NIKOLIC IS GIVING KEYNOTE SEMINAR AT TRANSMEDIA SEMINAR IN JANUARY SPONSORED BY HKDI
OPPOSITE PAGE & THIS PAGE BELOW PRATT INSTITUTE
THIS PAGE RIGHT THE NEW SCHOOL IN NEW YORK CITY



some of its brilliant minds pay a return visit to Hong Kong and deepen their understanding of HKDI’s potential of being a leader in the field’s development in Asia. Other exciting initiatives have also been set up, such as a recent address to the Entertainment Expo and an ongoing partnership with Nicholas Tse’s Post Production Office, one of Hong Kong’s leading post-production houses. By the end of December, Jeff Gomez, CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, will come to HKDI and offer insights on how to employ the techniques of transmedia to promote businesses in a summit organised by the Hong Kong Printers Association.

What can students of the new discipline expect? The answer, from the history of the industry so far, is a new world in which the full power of new technologies is harnessed for narrative effect. Transmedia has the ability to appeal directly to the new interactive environment in which designs and ideas are communicated being, in essence, branded

storytelling. A new breed of agencies have been created which are solely dedicated to transmedia; one of the best-known is Starlight Runner Entertainment in New York, which “creates and expands fictional universes in the form of elaborate intellectual property bibles and story and style guides.” These guides are almost inconceivably complex, covering all major characters, story arcs, world details, weapons, vehicles, technology, magic and even insignia. This bedrock of content provides the raw material to allow multiple franchise extensions into traditional, interactive and advanced media.

The value of this is illustrated by the fact that transmedia adopters include some of the most talked-about movie franchises: *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *TRON*, *Halo* and *Avatar*. However, while transmedia is a natural fit with the film industry, complementing its innate narrative qualities, it’s in the broader commercial sphere that we’re now seeing some of the most exciting new initiatives.

One of the best-received transmedia campaigns

《THOSE WHO MAKE THEIR NAMES IN TRANSMEDIA IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS WILL BECOME HUGE INFLUENTIAL IN DIGITAL MARKETING.》

THIS PAGE: MTV OFFICE IN NEW YORK; MADE IN NEW YORK MEDIA CENTER BY IFF; OPPOSITE PAGE: TOP: MISS RONG SHENG, TRANSMEDIA CONSULTANT FROM LEAVEN MEDIA IN SHANGHAI

was devised for the Audi A3 launch in the US, "THE ART OF THE HEIST". It embraced the target audience's need for control over their environment and invited them into an immersive and intriguing alternative reality. The story blurred fact and fiction by creating a mysterious narrative that involved potential buyers in the recovery of an A3 stolen from Audi's US headquarters. At the centre of the story were six new A3s containing coded plans for the largest art heist in history; however, one car also contained the key to decrypting the information hidden in the others, and the mystery behind the heist unfolded in real-time nationwide over three months. The final chapter was staged before a live audience at a luxury hotel in LA, where the ultimate villain was finally revealed.

Another genre-busting transmedia campaign was "Why so serious?" devised to promote Christopher Nolan's then forthcoming *Dark Knight* Batman film. The multi-channel assault started with direct mail and messages on social media and mobile phones. These led users to websites that created an immersive world, a canvas on which Gotham City promoted itself brightly with friendly restaurants, helpful public transport timetables and clean-living politicians.

However, in the run-up to the film launch, this perfectly ordered world was disrupted by the arrival of Batman's nemesis, The Joker. All the websites for these imaginary companies and individuals were defaced with The Joker's bloodstained taunts against Gotham's hapless citizens, suggesting an insurgence of evil in the troubled metropolis was imminent. This, of course, was true – but only in the context of the new Batman film.

Followers of the campaign took to the streets to declare their support for Gotham



Sheng Rong 盛荣

City's "Assistant District Attorney", the fictional Harvey Dent, while other groups took to dressing up as The Joker. The initiative occupied 10 million participants across 75 countries, hundreds of web pages, interactive games, real world events video and numerous unique collectibles. And it contributed to the *Dark Knight* scoring the biggest opening day of all time, with opening night, 3am and 6am showings all sold out. The film went on to become the biggest grossing film of the year.

Nokia's 2010 "Conspiracy for Good" transmedia campaign also broke down walls between separate media and conventional product promotion. This "alternate reality drama" was spearheaded by *Heroes* creator Tim Kring and sponsored by Nokia. Players used free mobile games from Nokia's Ovi Store to join a mission "Conspiracy for Good", a fictional organisation that actually contributed real benefits to the cause of literacy in rural Africa. The promotion involved mobile games, links to websites that continued the drama, and climaxed after four months with events featuring actors on the streets of London playing characters from the story. Participants needed the AR (augmented reality) capability installed in the new phones to allow them to play. More than half a

million games and apps were downloaded, and over 4000 dedicated players joined the global movement!

Thus far, much transmedia content has targeted children through cartoons or geeks through science fiction, horror, and fantasy franchises. This shouldn't be surprising as it has a natural resonance with early adapters, digital-savvy 18-27 year old males with disposable time and income. But, there are plenty of signs that transmedia experiences may appeal more broadly. For example, some believe transmedia strategies may be key to the survival of soap operas. It will take time, but as HKDI's planned foray into the field suggests, there will be rich opportunities to influence the shape of the industry.

As Vladan Nikolic remarked in January, "This field is still not established – so it's absolutely the right time to get involved. At this moment, anyone can become one of the leaders of the future." There's little doubt that the individuals who make their names in transmedia in the next few years will become hugely influential in this revolutionary incarnation of storytelling and digital marketing. And for fans of great shows and brands, there will be the opportunity to interact with, drill deeper into and even contribute to the stories and products they love. ☺