

Lost in the borderlines between user-generated content and the cultural industry

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Keywords: convergence, cultural industries, storytelling, transmedia, user-generated content.

Twenty-first century convergence processes (industrial convergence, professional convergence, technological convergence, and narrative convergence) have completely changed the media landscape. Today convergence is one of the key concepts for understanding what's happening in the media ecology. In this short essay I'll focus on media narrative convergence, or in other words, transmedia storytelling.

What do we mean by *transmedia storytelling*? According to Henry Jenkins (2006), many contemporary works are characterised by expanding their narrative through different media (film, TV, comics, books, etc.) and platforms (blogs, forums, wikis, social networks, etc.). For example, the Fox series *24* began as a TV show but ended up including mobisodes, webisodes, videogames for consoles, mobile games, comics, novels, board games and a plethora of official and fan websites. We can add a second feature to this transmedia dimension of storytelling evidenced by Jenkins: the creation of user-generated contents. Transmedia narratives begin in a Hollywood studio or in the comic book editor's office in Manhattan, but continue for example, in a blog written by a Finnish girl or in a parody video uploaded onto YouTube by a group of Brazilian fans.

This description of transmedia storytelling is very clear: on one side, we have the commercial production (the canon) and on the other side, the user-generated contents (the fandom). Both environments, the industrial and the handcrafted, produce different texts, with different production logic and different aesthetics. In this essay I'd like to demonstrate that the borderline between user-generated contents and culture industry is not clearly defined. Let's see an example.

The *Pardillos* experience

Pardillos is a webcomic¹ created by the Spanish student Carlos Azaustre that follows the events of ABC's *Lost* TV seasons step by step. The first webcomic was released in 2007 after a promotional trailer that announced its arrival. The author introduced his particular version of the story on the blog:

When parody overcomes fiction...

February 30, 2004. An airplane of Naufragic Airlines starts the Flight 3.1415 from Ibiza Island to Cuenca. The flight never arrives to its destination. In the midst of the journey a fatal accident causes the plane to crash on a mysterious island in the Mediterranean Sea. Fourteen survivors, including a doctor, a butcher boy scout, a fugitive, a spunky, a robot, a video game geek, a pregnant girl ... will face many dangers and will have to survive on the island.

Why '*Pardillos*'? The title of the webcomic is just part of the parodic spirit of the story. In Spanish *Lost* is translated as *Perdidos*, from which we arrive to *Pardillos*, the Spanish word for *bumpkin*, *yokel*. Azaustre continued the publication of his parody on the web until 2008, when he decided to take the big step and print it. As the publishers refused, he compiled the first season's comics¹ and released it himself calling the volume *Pardillos: Primera Temporada* (*Pardillos: First Season*).

Pardillos is a comic in which the fictional world of *Lost* (its characters, their narrative programs, the relations between them and the sequence of events triggered on the island) is reinforced by a complex intertextual network of links with contemporary Spanish popular culture. The parody is not only in the jargon used by the characters or in the transformation of their names (i.e., *John Locke* à *Yon Locko*), but in the intertextuality that does not hesitate to poke fun at the island's TV show hosts and reality show contestants who are very well-known to the Spanish public. A couple of examples show this intense intertextual game. During the first season the Iraqi Sayid Jarrah (an ex-torturer in the Republican Guard of Saddam Hussein and telecommunications expert, represented in the comic as a robot) meets Danielle Rousseau, the only survivor of a French expedition that sank off the island 16 years earlier. In *Pardillos* Danielle Rousseau becomes Carmen Russo, the Italian actress that won the Spanish edition of *Sobrevivientes 2006* (*Survivors 2006*), the reality show is located precisely on a tropical island where contestants compete to survive. On another page of *Pardillos* the presenter of the Dharma Initiative orientation video is Mercedes Mila, the host of the Spanish version of *Big Brother*. This kind of intertextual play is found throughout the comic and adds a further level of complexity to the narrative interpretation. To understand *Pardillos* it is not enough to be a faithful follower of *Lost*, the reader must also be steeped in Spanish mass culture and its characters.

A few months after its publication, *Pardillos: Primera Temporada* was available at major book stores in Spain. In 2009, coinciding with claiming the prize for Best On-Line

Comic at the Comic Exhibition in Madrid, the third album was then released. The fourth and fifth albums arrived in 2010. By the end of 2011 *Pardillos* had sold over 27,000 copies. This experience leads us to question the boundaries between user-generated content and the culture industry. What started as a webcomic of a college student, ended up as a product that is distributed and sold throughout commercial channels like FNAC.

As we can see, the borderline between user-generated contents and the culture industry's production is very porous. Contents born on the margins may end up being taken over by large communication systems, in the same way that the culture industry pays close attention to the prosumer's productions and has no scruples about distributing these contents and even making a profit from them.

The DIY narrative

Many *Lost* fans were disappointed with the last episode of the series. From the beginning it was clear that not all viewers would be satisfied with the show's conclusion. *Lost* fits perfectly into a subgenre that the Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia defined as *paranoid fiction* (1991), that is, a story dominated by a conspiracy climate in the context of a continuous interpretative delirium.

The interpretation of the whole transmedia world of *Lost* (not just the TV show) is founded on Pierre Levy's collective intelligence (1994). The construction of possible worlds and the creation of narrative hypotheses about the future development of a plot are basic elements of the interpretive process. *Lost* and many other transmedia productions demonstrate that nowadays this interpretive process is no longer an individual activity. Possible worlds and hypotheses are built on online communities, in a technology mediated global discussion. This radically new situation is a challenge to traditional semiotic theories, which are mainly based on the individual reading or watching experience.

In the specific case of *Lost*, what should be a 'normal' interpretation process has transformed into a frenetic search for the meaning of *everything*. Even the most standard ellipses of the narration must be fulfilled and explained. The army of *Lost* fans has developed an interpretive *horror vacui*: the dynamics of the plot spread a paranoid epidemic in which the consumers are always looking for new clues, hidden codes, and puzzles to solve from one coast to another of *Lost*'s transmedia fictional world. From their perspective *Lost* is a complex network of *Easter eggs* waiting to be deciphered.

Paranoid fiction

If anything what characterises transmedia narratives is that they tend to drag on into eternity and it is almost impossible to stop them, as much as J. J. Abrams and his team of writers have tried to finish.

Lost's narrative engine is still working on. Transmedia storytelling teaches us that if producers don't want, don't know or can't generate new content, then prosumers will create and distribute them. You don't like *Lost*'s ending? Create your own The End, DIY (Do

It Yourself). In this context the new seasons of *Lost* are being cooked up in the social networks, in the conversations of their fan tribes that continue the debate about alternative endings and hypothetical spin-offs that make them dream of a seventh season.

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¹ See <http://perdidos-comic.blogspot.com.es>.

The borderline theme is particularly of interest in that it has become so prominent in the last ten to twenty years. It suggests not only a cultural activation but also an archetypal one. Nathan Schwartz-Salant in his book, *The Borderline Personality - Vision and Healing*, suggests that a central problem for these personality types is a religious or spiritual one. The implications of his work are that there is a subset of the borderline personality population for whom spirituality is key. Last week the Creative Industries Innovation Centre released a report that found 43% of the creative workforce consists of creative practitioners embedded in non-creative industries such as manufacturing, financial services and healthcare. This led to an article in which it was suggested my recent claim that the creative industries had "run out of steam" also on *The Conversation* was wrong. What I had wanted to say was that the creative industry's agenda (the action plan for the industry at large) has run out of steam, and this is why Culture as economy. The term "cultural industries" emerges