

A Canticle for Mary Sue: What Transmedia Aesthetics might do for Futures Communication

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I am especially grateful to the Symposium organizers for challenging me to think about Aesthetics and Futures, and so driving me in new intellectual directions even before I arrived in Hawaii. The following isn't a formal summary of refined ideas, but, rather, a sketch of these initial explorations.

My approach to futures theory-building and innovation combines the organization sciences with new media studies. Tying this all together is a focus on narrative, not simply as way of conveying and remembering information, but also, for instance, as a mode of rhetoric and knowledge generation. Narratives are crucial to futures communication; notably but not only through the use of scenario methods. From my organizational sciences perspective, narratives support strategic decision-making and critical reflection by helping organizational actors comprehend uncertainties. Or in other words, to make sense of them; hence my special interest in the sense-making literature—particularly Karl Weick, Dave Snowden, and Brenda Dervin. Of course, a fundamental narrative sense-making challenge for organizations is the uncertainty of their futures.

My new media perspective, is chiefly concerned with how transmedia storytelling (coined by popular media scholar Henry Jenkins in 2003) might be used to enhance organizational futures-orientated sense-making in the Web 2.0 era and beyond. Transmedia storytelling is an artistic and strategic paradigm that has become popular, most notably in Hollywood and marketing circles, as a means of engaging the fragmented, distracted audiences of a continuously disrupted and turbulent media landscape. At its heart is the creation of coordinated narratives distributed across different media contexts, with each being part of a greater whole, a 'storyworld'; participatory engagement of audiences in storyworld co-creation is also increasingly typical. Whilst transmedia's roots lie, like the idea of scenario, in Hollywood's popular culture arts, preparing for the Emerging Futures & Futurists Symposium was the first time I had paid attention to the aesthetics of narrative and its overlap with sense-making.

My talk focused on the relationship between the futures profession and popular culture as a key communication challenge. My overarching question being not only how we can support and sustain a resurgence of futures thinking in mainstream conversation (I believe that the generation of what Stuart Candy inspiringly envisions as "the futures of everyday life" requires both critical and affirmative engagement with popular culture) but also how this can be most effectively done in the same complex, turbulent media environment that

transmedia storytellers face. Although futures' relationship with popular culture has improved promisingly in recent years, its communication potential is still limited by anxieties that might usefully be thought of as bad aesthetics; a deep uneasiness that comes from trying to make sense of that relationship's mixture.

I suggested that the Futures field's attitudes towards engaging popular culture might be expressed in three broad ways (scenarios if you like) that reflect these feelings of bad aesthetics: Monkish (where professional futures knowledge must be institutionally protected in amidst popular culture), Gonzo (where popular culture is primarily a target for jamming-and-hacking by grittily enlightened futurists); and Collapse-Folk (where futures knowledge has been thoroughly mangled after being absorbed by grassroots popular culture).

Reflecting the recent rejuvenated intertwining of science fiction and futures, I compared each scenario to a scifi classic (respectively, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Transmetropolitan*, and *Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play*). This rejuvenation is one of the great hopes for the futures-popular culture relationship. With the rise of design fiction, Brian David Johnson's science fiction prototyping, and Neal Stephenson's Project Hieroglyph, perhaps the backlash against the populist muddling of futurology is fading. But the sense of bad aesthetics that haunted the relationship between scifi and futures during that backlash, where both sides worried about being confused for the other—a “cultural cringe,” to borrow a useful Anglo-Australian phrase—may have given way to another kind of cringing, especially characteristic of the Web 2.0 participatory culture era.

That is, the bad aesthetics anxieties in the relations between elite/expert and grassroots/amateur producers of knowledge. These anxieties are not simply about the complications of measuring the legitimacy and utility of amateur, popular culture-steeped, futures content according to professional, expert authority but also the threatening disruption and usurption of that authority itself. The imagined disaster this might lead to is expressed in Collapse-Folk, whilst two kinds of elite/expert solutions are encapsulated in Monkish and Gonzo. I don't dismiss the rationales that these scenarios represent—they reflect important and justified concerns—but I think that these concerns can be addressed whilst also being much more positive about popular culture's value for expert futures knowledge.

I proposed in my talk a fourth futures-popular culture relationship scenario, Participatory Pop Culture, which embraces grassroots/amateur production futures knowledge in the Web 2.0 era by applying transmedia storytelling principles. This approach is not a cyberutopian free-for-all and retains some wariness about grassroots creativity. The participatory dimension of the transmedia paradigm doesn't just arise from the need of powerful storytelling institutions to engage new media audiences by leveraging grassroots collective intelligences to help navigate the turbulence of the media landscape. It also arises from their need to manage the involvement of the grassroots in ways that satisfy and reward these amateurs whilst upholding the integrity of the institutions' storyworlds and furthering their strategic interests. In Hollywood terms, it's about managing the co-creative relationship between, on one side, the franchise owners and professional artists, and on the other, the fans.

Fan culture was represented in my fourth scenario by that much-derided but underrated symbol of 'bad aesthetics' in scifi fan-fiction, the Mary Sue (a protagonist channeling the wish-fulfillment fantasies of the amateur author). Crucial to the

emergence of the Hollywood transmedia approach was the studios' recognition of fan cultures' remixing, expansion, and reinvention of official narrative content as legitimate, valuable forms of creativity and knowledge where the risk of disruption to official storyworlds could be managed through co-creation engagement. A similar revolution, I believe, can help the futures field leapfrog ahead in addressing its new media popular culture communication challenge.

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