The Challenge of Transmedia: Consistent User Experiences

Abstract
Consistency across experiences in a transmedial production is a criterion of user experience that has so far eluded capture. This position paper highlights the challenges met in designing a tool to measure consistency and suggests a consistency scale model across the four dimensions of transmedia experiences.

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Consistency; user experience; transmedial storytelling;

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

Introduction
A recent trend in marketing, but also an attractive set of channels for today’s producer, is transmedia storytelling [1]. This involves the use of disjoint narrative experiences being delivered through different media, such as film, novel, and game, inviting the reader to learn more about the story by engaging with the other experiences. Each experience tells a story from within a greater setting, commonly known as a transmedial world or universe. The choice of medium for each narrative component is specifically chosen to take advantage of its unique strengths, providing an eclectic overall experience that will provide a deeper
engagement for the audience[1]. This position paper explores the measurement of this transmedial experience, specifically in terms of consistency across the individual media experiences.

Transmedia
Transmedia experiences are different from multimodal experiences in that the experiences are not simultaneous but in sequence and disconnected. They are also different from cross-media experiences in that the narratives are not remediated from one form to another, but rather expanded further or provided as backstory to each other, or even running in parallel [3].

Transmedial experiences thus provide a challenging context for measuring user experience (UX). Different media afford different types of data gathering, which can be combined together when used in a multi-modal setting. But when these multi-modal experiences are chronologically disjoint, disparate data makes comparison of UX difficult and may introduce unknown variables that may jeopardize the validity and reliability of the measured UX.

One possibility is to find instruments that can gather, and provide comparison of, UX data across formats, such as the use of the Games Experience Questionnaire (GEQ) to measure UX in both digital games and board games [4],[5]. In this previous work the choice fell upon the GEQ due to its emphasis on the UX rather than the user interface (UI), and thus it lends itself well to transmedial evaluation of player experience.

Limitations
The GEQ provides three main modules addressing UX as a result of game mechanics (the Core module), UX as a result of other players (the Social Presence module), and a reflective questionnaire (the Post-Game module) [6].

However the GEQ does not address the measurement of UX as a result of multiple exposures to the same game, at any level: be it the same version, the same genre, or the same narrative. Thus first time players may provide feedback that is different from repeat players playing the same game session because the latter would be liable to pass judgement clouded by previous sessions of the same game.

Moreover, repeat exposure to the same narrative is compounded when each experience is delivered through a different medium as in the case of transmedia productions. What bias will a previous experience provide for the audience’s judgement of another experience in the same transmedial world but through a different medium? Each individual experience may provide a highly engaging experience but may break the immersion when compared to the other experiences.

Consistency
The criterion that captures this cross-experience bias is termed consistency. It is deemed to be a requisite for a successfully engaging and meaningful user experience for transmedial storytelling [7].

Internal consistency in games has long been given importance and a number of UX tools have featured it in their measurement of UX including questionnaires [8] and heuristic frameworks [9]. Internal consistency is defined by the latter as “making changes that last and predictable responses by the game” and includes
consistency “between the game elements and the overarching settings as well as the story” [9].

However no tools exist that can help capture, and then compare, consistency across experiences – like the ITC-SOPI that is used to measure presence across media [8]. Consistency is clearly a subjective measurement, as it depends on the judge’s previous experiences, or rather on their memory of such experiences. This makes standardization of such an instrument difficult to achieve and optimize for mass distribution.

**Dimensions of Consistency**
Consistency clearly points to repeat exposures to the same elements of a story. Three main story elements have been identified that can be gauged in terms of consistency: the storyworld, the characters, and the timeline of events. Each of these elements can be present in each transmedial experience and the audience will judge an experience’s consistency in terms of each of these dimensions [10]. To these elements, this position paper adds agency as another important element in the case of interactive media such as games and interactive digital storytelling.

**Levels of Consistency**
It is in terms of these dimensions that a definition of consistency and a five-stage continuum from consistent to conflicting has been suggested in a short paper submitted to the ICIDS 2015 conference, which has been accepted and is currently in press.

This continuum ranges from Consistent, where persistence prevails in each dimension and outcomes are predictable and deterministic, through Irrelevant, a neutral state of consistency where new experiences neither negatively nor positively correlate to prior experiences, to Conflicting, where the audience is taken totally by surprise with the outcomes of events and actions – be they of non-player characters or their own.

Each of these can be applied to each dimension described above for each experience in the transmedia production, leading to the 3D consistency scale model (See Figure 1). An overall measurement of a single experience’s consistency relative to the rest of the experiences in the transmedial production can be built out of each dimension’s score but how is this overall consistency to be measured? Shall each dimension have an equal weighting, or is one more important than the others? Is this weighting constant across all media, or does it change according to the medium being used? Does it make sense to combine these scores into one?

**Subjective Consistency**
The subjective nature of consistency makes any design of a tool to measure this characteristic across experiences require the player’s account of their exposure to previous experiences in the same storyworld in order to provide a demographic classification of results. Similarities with other storyworlds and game genres will also need to be taken into consideration – such as fans of Lord of the Rings playing World of Warcraft or Warhammer Online may confuse the meaning and representation of an Orc.

The role of memory in all of this must not be overlooked: the reader’s ability to accept inconsistencies across experiences, because the user model of the story is not detailed enough to capture the minutiae that allow detection of such
inconsistencies[11], leads to the measurement of a lighter form of consistency here referred to as “perceived consistency”, a term borrowed from psychological studies [12].

**A Way Forward**

In the history of UX research, qualitative methods were the first means of acquiring subjective outcomes of designed experiences but, in order to scale out the acquisition of such data, the design of quantitative methods has slowly but surely taken over as UX criteria were identified and standardized.

Being at the origins of measuring consistency across experiences, it is envisaged that the first attempts at its acquisition will likewise be in the form of qualitative means, such as (semi-structured) interviews, in order to identify measurable UX criteria that correlate to, and ideally cause, perceived consistency. This may then provide the foundations for scalable quantitative tools that can measure consistency across transmedial experiences.

**Author Biography**

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**References**
