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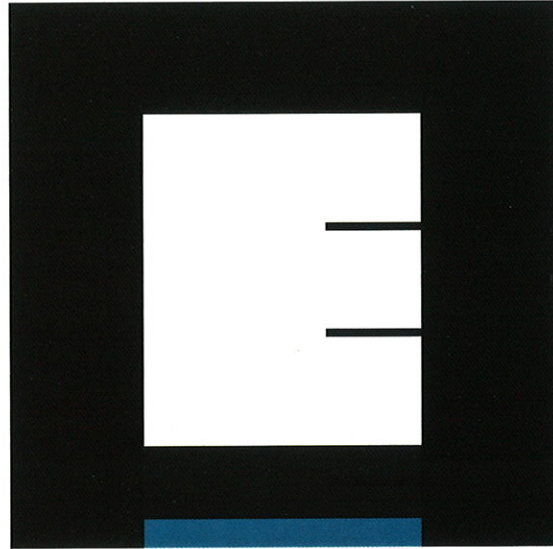
# ENTERTAINMENT REIMAGINED

Film and TV are moving to a new form of storytelling - taking in the mobile internet, alternate-reality games, even street-corner stunts. WIRED meets the pioneers of transmedia

By Tom Cheshire and Charlie Burton. Illustration: Chrissie Abbott.  
Photography: Timothy Saccenti and Shamil Tanna.

Tim Kring: an early  
transmedia champion.  
He unfolded his  
show, *Heroes*, over  
multiple formats





sther Robinson got off the R train in Astoria, Queens, and started walking to the American Museum of the Moving Image. It was a warm July evening in 2007 and Robinson, then 37 years old and a filmmaker, had come with a friend to see a movie, *Head Trauma*. As they approached the cinema, she noticed that the payphones were ringing – all four of them. “You forget payphones exist,” recalls Robinson. “That was the first thing I noticed.” She picked one up: all she could hear were fragments of a conversation, “sounds of madness”. Outside the cinema, a preacher in short sleeves and a tie was raving, handing out apocalyptic comic books to passers-by. He pressed one into Robinson’s hand as she hurried past, anxious to get to the film. The opening credits prompted the audience to send in a text to a given number. As the film rolled, they started receiving “weird text messages”; phones were ringing.

The film was about a drifter who inherits his mother’s house and starts to lose his mind. The next day, back in Brooklyn, Robinson found the comic in her handbag. On the back was written: “Do you want to play a game?”, along with an address, *headtrauma-movie.com*. She typed it in to her computer. What she found was an online game that continued the story. “In the middle of it, the phone rang,” she says. She recognised the voice. It was the film’s “hooded villain”. He started asking questions: “Do you feel guilty? Have you ever lost consciousness?” Last, he asked Robinson to tell him her darkest secret. Her answer started playing back on a loop through her computer speakers. Robinson clicked on the exit box. She kept clicking, but nothing happened. Her phone buzzed with a text: “Where are you going? We’re not finished yet...” At that point, Robinson was dumped into a conference call with other cinemagoers who had just gone through the same experience. “We were all like, ‘What the fuck was that?’ It was totally nuts.”

Unwittingly, she had just participated in an emerging form of mainstream entertainment. Lance Weiler, the creator of *Head Trauma*, had programmed software to make all the payphones on the block ring. The preacher was an actor, a lead in the feature. Based on the participants’ responses to the automated phone calls, audio and video launched on the desktop screen. The exit box was a fake. Clicking on it sent that last text. For Weiler, a 41-year-old New Yorker, the experience “demonstrated the fluidity of an audience. After the movie ended, it followed people home.”

This is transmedia storytelling. Large studios and broadcasters, as well as independent filmmakers such as Weiler, are building fictional worlds that smash through their frames on to multiple platforms. Unlike quick promotional spin-offs, this new type of tie-in extends, rather than adapts, storylines. It tells various parts of the story using distinct media, exploiting the qualities unique to each platform. So when you watch a TV show, you might follow a sub-plot that spills on to the web, then read the dénouement in a graphic novel. Yes, writers have long created worlds that go beyond the page – L Frank Baum did as much with his 1900 novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, whose storyworld he expanded into a musical and other books. But today’s transmedia producers are planning for multiple platforms from the start. They design fictional

universes that are consistent however the audience engages.

The trend is already reconfiguring the industry, affecting everything from how stories are made, down to titles on business cards. In April, the Producers Guild of America, which represents production staff in TV, film and online, ratified a new credit: transmedia producer, which codified these characteristics. Jeff Gomez, a videogame producer, was instrumental in pushing the credit: in 2000, after becoming excited by the multiplatform genre, he had left his job as an editor at Acclaim Entertainment to start Starlight Runner, a transmedia production company. After he successfully extended the *Hot Wheels* brand across videogames, TV and film in 2003, a string of Hollywood studios asked him to create multiplatform worlds for the likes of *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, *Avatar* and *Tron 2*. This side of the Atlantic, broadcasters are taking the lead, using transmedia to invigorate small-screen titles such as *Emmerdale* and *Doctor Who* (see right). In a world of multichoice TV, mobile and the web, competition for viewers has never been greater, and audience attention never more fragmented. That’s why many content creators are betting that transmedia will focus it once again.

In 1998, *The Blair Witch Project* proved – accidentally – that even small-scale multimedia efforts could pack a hefty punch. Made with handheld video cameras and presented as a documentary, the film followed four fictional student filmmakers as they tracked the mythical Blair Witch in Burkittsville, Maryland. “It was improvised, so we developed this mythology to give to the actors,” says Mike Monello, 41, one of the film’s five coproducers, who now runs a transmedia marketing company in New York called Campfire.

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISIE ABBOTT

# DOCTOR WHO

The Time Lord is taking some fresh adventures to the 3D universe

Sheffield; November 23, 2009. The 11th Doctor is standing in a grey room with his eyes shut, screaming loudly. Across from him, a tall man with a mop of curly hair and wraparound glasses is recording every detail of our hero’s appearance, in 45° increments. Is the Time Lord in trouble? No – but he is about to materialise on an alien landscape: a transmedia video game.

Today, Matt Smith, the 27-year-old from Northampton who plays the Doctor, is being retouched by Sean Millard, creative director of developer Sumo Digital. It’s an animation process which involves tracing the lines of photographs and video frames to recreate a person in 3D, and Smith has spent the morning performing the library of expressions and

actions that his avatar will later use in *The Adventure Games*. The computer render of Smith is apparently so accurate that the actor found it disconcerting to see himself – physical quirks and all – transferred to the game. “I was quite concerned at the way I ran,” says Smith. “Apparently like Tony Adams, with a straight back.”

Having launched on June 5, the day of the TV series’ tenth episode, the two-hour role-playing games extend the *Doctor Who* universe and are understood to be BBC Multiplatform’s most expensive commission to date (it won’t reveal the figures). “There are 17 episodes in the new series of *Doctor Who* this year, four of which are interactive,” explains 39-year-old Anwen Aspden, executive producer at BBC

Wales Online who is responsible for delivering the games. “The show’s lead writer and executive producer, Steven Moffat, wanted to do something big and innovative, and they’re his vision: the games are part of the *Doctor Who* canon and all the writers are from *Who*. But they can also stand alone.”

Of course, *Doctor Who* has dabbled in multiplatform before. Beginning with a tie-in annual in 1964, the story has spread to LPs, radio, film, comics, novels, games, merchandise, animation, metasites and other online exercises. But transmedia also demands that narratives cohere, and this is where many previous efforts failed. The TV series and *The Adventure Games* share a continuity – take the interior of the TARDIS. The set designers built a staircase and a door that can be seen in the background in the TV show but aren’t used. In the game, they will be integral to the plot. *The Adventure Game* also showcases the remodelled Daleks, and the content of these RPGs will impact future stories, says Phil Ford, the 49-year-old screenwriter from Staffordshire who penned three of the games. “Skaro [the Daleks’ home planet] and Kaalann, the city of the Daleks in the game, are what they would have to look like if we went back to them on television.”

The games also connect with *Doctor Who*’s past. Not only does the first instalment reference the Doctor’s time on Earth in 1963, the year in which the programme first aired, but they will resurrect “something from the Patrick Troughton era [1966–69] that I don’t think has been seen since”.

It doesn’t stop there. In May, Moffat announced he’s taking the TARDIS to the stage with *Doctor Who Live*, a production featuring more “brand-new screen material for Matt Smith’s Doctor” in video sequences. Follow him to this new dimension from October 8. CB



## A history of transmedia

1953

**Winky Dink And You** An interactive show on CBS in the US encourages children to draw on their TV screens.

1955

**Disneyland** Walt Disney expands his cartoon kingdom into the real world with a theme park in California.

1957

**Zorro** Disney creates a live-action version of the comic book, starring Guy Williams as the swordsman.

1963

**Astro Boy** The Japanese manga comic book begins to share storylines with TV episodes.

1968

**Star Trek** Novelisations prompt creator Gene Roddenberry to declare no books are “canon” – not even his.



"But whenever we cut away [from the handheld footage] to give you information about it, the momentum of the movie started to die. We tested a long cut instead, and the response showed that people were grabbed by it, so we went with that. Then we had some clips shown on Bravo's *Split Screen*, and John Pierson, its presenter, played along. He said, 'So are the guys attached to the film pulling our leg, or is the Blair Witch something that we should be concerned about?'" *Split Screen*'s messageboard flooded with chatter.

In June that year, excited by the buzz, the producers put the rest of the backstory online and wrote themselves into the narrative. Supposedly, the families of the missing students had asked Monello and his collaborators to compile the discovered footage. When the film was released in July 1999, they already had a hungry audience – with minimal marketing spend. The result: wider distribution than they could ever have achieved with their tiny budget. "We didn't have access to film-festival programmers or distributors," Monello says. "But as we were saying, 'The film's going to open in New York, Chicago, LA', we had all these fans who were like, 'Well, when am I going to see it in Atlanta? Or Alabama?' All we could tell them was to call their local theatres and ask for it, which they did." Made for \$25,000, it grossed \$249 million worldwide.

Although *Blair Witch* was transmedia-shaped, nobody was using the term.

That came in late autumn 2002, when Henry Jenkins, a media professor at MIT, went to an Electronic Arts workshop held

for Hollywood producers and game designers in Los Angeles.

"There was enormous excitement there about the prospect of deeper collaboration," says the 52-year-old, whose work on convergence culture became a touchstone for transmedia theory. "They were groping towards a reimagining of what entertainment could do in an era of networked communications, but lacked a conceptual vocabulary. My job was to sum things up at the end of each brainstorm. So I tightened my own thinking." He wrote an essay, *Transmedia Storytelling*, on the plane journey back. It was published in MIT's *Technology Review* in January 2003 and gave the movement a language.

As broadband-internet adoption started to hit TV ratings, the networks began to see the new digital platforms – YouTube, MySpace, Habbo – as potential tools for building audiences. In 2006, the NBC network used the new sci-fi drama *Heroes* as a testing ground. "The dotcom division of NBC had a mandate to push content on to the digital space, which happened to coincide perfectly with the launch of our show," says Tim Kring,

The BBC's Victoria  
Jaye sees *Doctor  
Who* as a transmedia  
experiment

## SALT

The action blockbuster  
starring you in its  
interactive prologue

You're a junior agent in the CIA, part of a special force with a mission to track down Agent Evelyn Salt and stop Day X, a terrorist plot. This morning, Salt contacted you via a coded message. She pleaded her innocence and recruited you to help clear her name.

Special Agent Larson, CIA director of operations, asks you into his office. He leans over the table and asks questions. Your choice is Truth or Bluff. "I want you to think very carefully when I ask you where you went: were you on a sanctioned op?" Bluff.

"You're not part of an active op. What were you doing? Did it have anything to do with the Day X investigation?" Bluff.

"Have you been in contact with Evelyn Salt since she's been on the run?" Bluff.

Larson is satisfied. You're involved – not just with Salt, but in the next generation of Hollywood storytelling.

"It's about finding ways to set up the story and then to allow the audience to step in," says Nathan Mayfield. Sony Pictures asked his company, Hoodlum, to create a transmedia experience for its movie, *Salt*. The agent is played by Angelina Jolie. *Day X Exists*, an interactive game running for ten weeks before the film's July US release, is the introduction to that story. The first episode starts where the trailer ends and combines a game of bluff with high production values. "Salt asks you to participate in the story that will lead to events that play out in the film," says Mayfield, 36.

"Throughout the process our teams collaborated every step of

the way," says Dwight Caines, president of worldwide digital marketing for Sony Pictures. "Particularly on the game narrative – to ensure it supported the film while not giving away any spoilers." But *Day X Exists* has its own cliffhanger, according to Mayfield: "Unfortunately, by the end of the missions, you know way too much information..." TC



ILLUSTRATION: CHRISSIE ABBOTT. PHOTOGRAPHY: SHAMIL TANNA



1977 **Star Wars** A merchandising monster. Lucas eventually creates a continuity database for his transmedia product.

1996 **Pokémon** Children don't care on which device they consume the pocket-monster world.

1999 **The Blair Witch Project** The low-budget film accidentally uses transmedia to make it big.

2003 **Hot Wheels: World Race** Mattel creates the first multiplatform narrative based on a retail product.

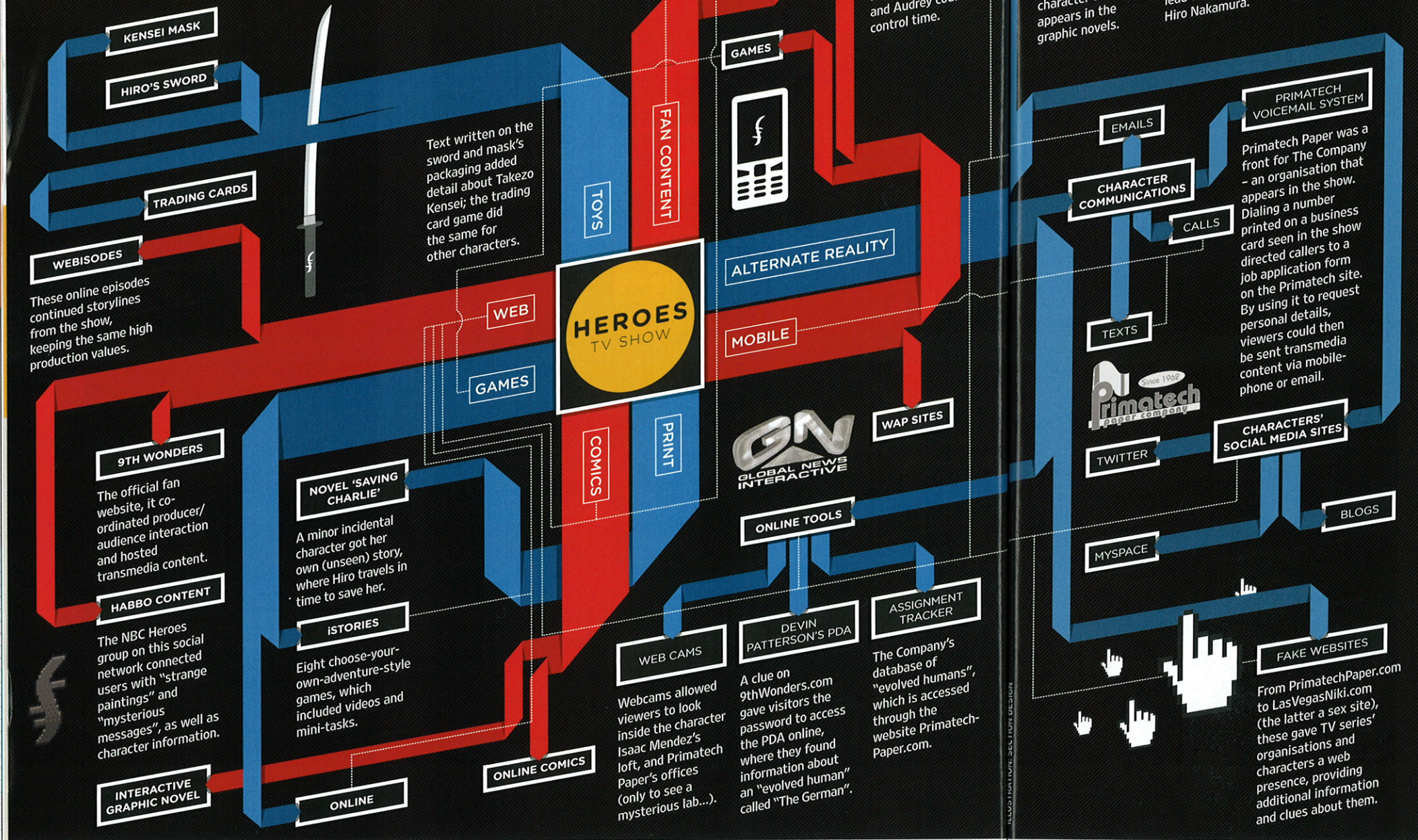
2004 **Lost** ABC uses metasites, an ARG, novels and mobisodes to engage audiences with its cult TV show.

2006 **Head Trauma** No budget, no problem: transmedia can work for indie producers.



# THE HEROES META-MAP

Navigate the multiple-platform crossovers and connections that made Heroes a transmedia success



the show's LA-based creator. "There was very little precedent for what we were doing, and for a long time we were able to indulge whatever ideas we had." From midway through season one, the story began to snake from the TV episodes to comics, through games and fake websites, expanding its borders at every turn (see left). For example, says Kring, 52, "We had a character called Wireless, who could pick up wireless communications out of thin air. She was introduced online in a comic, and then she showed up as a character in the show, about 15 episodes into season one. In some ways having a character migrate from one platform to another is the holy grail of transmedia storytelling. It works on a story level for anybody who had just watched the TV show; but for people who had followed online, they understood this woman's backstory. So when she showed up they had a much deeper connection to her."

Meanwhile, in New York, Lance Weiler was planning *Head Trauma*. He didn't have much cash to burn (the film cost \$126,000), but wanted an equally engaging experience. Weiler's answer? A pervasive game. "I started to experiment with it not being a film in traditional form - how could I put people into the shoes of the protagonist? How could the story move from one experience to another in ways that created some degree of social interaction?"

In its limited US cinema release, *Head Trauma* consistently sold out. So Weiler planned his next project, a post-apocalyptic mystery called *HiM* (short for *Hope is Missing*), as transmedia from the outset. It launched in 2007 as a blog set up by a man to find his missing fiancée, Hope Wilcott; the quest became an alternate-reality game. It proved popular: the blog attracted 2.5 million views. Weiler is now working on an augmented-reality app for Android phones which continues the story. And this autumn he'll shoot the *HiM* feature film with Ted Hope, producer of *21 Grams*.

Today, dedicated transmedia production houses are starting to win contracts from broadcasters and studios around the world. Los Angeles remains the biggest hub: Imagine, the multiple-Oscar-winning studio run by Brian Grazer and Ron Howard, recently struck a deal with Blacklight Studios, a transmedia startup, to get first refusal on film rights to its projects. Grazer says he signed Blacklight "before transmedia had penetrated Hollywood's consciousness, because it represents a new model, from both a creative and business standpoint." On the east coast, Jeff Gomez's Starlight Runner, and Fourth Wall Studios - whose founders worked with Steven Spielberg and Microsoft to produce alternate reality games - are now creating their own entertainment properties. Jim Stewartson, Fourth Wall's president, aims "to take transmedia to the masses. The market is going to be as large as the industry itself."

In the UK, the BBC too is experimenting - although "it's very early days," cautions Victoria Jaye, head of multiplatform commissioning. Her office in BBC Television Centre in west London is plastered with screen-grabs from *The Adventure Games*, a new *Doctor Who* video game. Still, Jaye is optimistic - not least when it comes to the bottom line. "For the two-hour drama you get in every *Adventure Game*, it's a fraction of the cost of television drama. And

2006 Cathy's Book This mystery novel/alternate-reality game becomes a mainstream hit with teenage girls.

2006 Heroes Tim Kring unfolds his sci-fi story over an unprecedented number of platforms.

2006 Battlestar Galactica Webisodes establish motivations for characters ahead of season three.

2006/7 Emmerdale Online Proves transmedia can prosper outside cult shows and sci-fi programming.

2007 Buffy The TV show may be over, but Buffy's adventures continue in comic-book form.

2007 Why So Serious? Hollywoodised ARG plugs the gap between *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*.



# CONSPIRACY FOR GOOD

Drama is leaping off the small screen and on to the streets, in a pilot "episode" you can participate in

Christopher Sandberg sprinted down the tunnel, terrified. He'd been waiting under a subway bridge outside a Thai kick-boxing club in the outskirts of Stockholm when a huge, black-haired man ran at him. He chased Sandberg and his three friends along the open sewers, through the tunnel, until they spilled on to the snowy kerb of a motorway. "So we ran and stumbled in the snow to dodge the cars and get out of the situation," says Sandberg.

It was a set-up: Sandberg staged the event last December as a blind test of the script for a new transmedia project, *Conspiracy For Good*. His pursuer was an actor – "he had to fall down a lot so we'd have time to get away".

CFG is a participatory drama that will play out this summer, with a cast of more

than 400 spread over five countries. The plot centres around a secret society whose aim is to change the world; the society has decided to go public and CFG is the recruitment campaign. The narrative will be played out over web videos, interactive puzzles (including clues hidden inside real MP3s such as tracks on the *White Album* by The Beatles), mobile apps and real-life events. The project is sponsored by Nokia, and a website went live on May 17. This features a video from Tim Kring, who asks visitors to participate in a movement to drive real-world change through interactive storytelling.

The creative team at The company P, Sandberg's transmedia production business, staged several tests last winter and spring. The Stockholm event ironed out kinks in the mobile technology

used. More importantly, it honed the team's storytelling. "We learned how to spread people out so as to have the sense of being at the mercy of a big adventure."

Not only does CFG stage live events as part of the story, it has an actual impact on the world. The project is funding Room To Read, an education charity, to build schools in Zambia. But a British oil company, Blackwell Briggs, threatens their construction. The oil firm is not obviously a fake: Karl Rove is following its Twitter account. "Everything is designed so you don't believe us when we say it's fake," says Sandberg. "It's a mindfuck."

To keep track of the free-screening narrative, P has developed an "orchestration engine" with the help of the Swedish Institute of Computer Science. The engine logs participants' activity, tying the strands into a consistent narrative. Scheduling is crucial.

Still, Sandberg isn't sure what will happen. "The project is a pilot – a live crash-test to see if we can do it in São Paulo, Tokyo and Paris next year." He is in discussion with Channel 4 about continuing the story, but perhaps not for TV. "Television is dead, but drama will never die." TC

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISIE ABBOTT.  
PHOTOGRAPHY: SHAMIL TANNA

we're looking for an increase in visitors to the website – a significant increase." But it's not just that. Jaye claims it's a worthwhile creative experiment in itself. "It's very much about innovation in storytelling, and using gameplay to reimagine stories."

She points to the success of *E20*, a web series that offered a transmedia take on *EastEnders*. At the end of each episode of the soap, viewers were directed to online videos varying from three to 16 minutes in length which explored the storylines of peripheral, younger characters. Its four leads debuted in the TV show before going on to star in the web series. *E20* garnered 3.3 million viewers in the two weeks it ran, securing the second series announced in April. "I realised, 'My God, the audience really want this,'" says Jaye.

Channel 4 sees transmedia as key to reaching audiences with its factual and educational programming. "We're commissioning for attention, not platform," says Matt Locke, who is responsible for the channel's cross-platform strategy – and he wants to find viewers wherever they are. The channel's younger audience, in particular, is engaging online: *1066*, a warfare-strategy web game commissioned alongside a history documentary of the same name, has been played 16 million times, for an average of 20 minutes per session, since May 2009.

Transmedia has blurred the divisions within organisations: Locke says that he stopped making those distinctions long ago (he insists that his commissioning team is "platform agnostic"). And at the BBC, for example, multiplatform producers are embedded with the traditional production

teams of each show; television writers work alongside games developers. Even the distinction between platforms may disappear as

audiences increasingly engage with separate platforms simultaneously. The market-research firm Nielsen estimates that in December 2009, US viewers spent an average of three hours and 30 minutes watching TV while also using the internet. That's nearly an hour longer than a year earlier. As new technology such as tablet devices built for sofa surfing and web-enabled TV become ubiquitous, they will make consuming transmedia content more natural.

Nor is the revolution confined to the living room: its pioneers are excited by the new wave of mobile-web apps, which will bring the transmedia experience to wherever the audience is. "The ability to have a device which knows where you are and who all your friends are gives us a tremendous opportunity to tell stories in the real world," says Kring. "And the rise of augmented reality is going to be fantastic: imagine seeing someone's face appear on your mobile screen in a three-dimensional way, telling you what to do next or giving you some piece of the story." He will experiment with both in his next project, *Conspiracy For Good* (see left).

For Gomez, storytellers who embrace these possibilities will define pop culture. So what will happen when transmedia's fledgling audience comes of age? He gets whimsical. "We're going to see our transmedia Mozart. We are going to see visionaries who understand the value of each media platform as if it's a separate musical instrument, who'll create symphonic narratives which leverage each of these multimedia platforms in a way that will create something we haven't encountered yet.

"And it's going to be magnificent." ■

Charlie Burton edits WIRED's Play section. Tom Cheshire is editorial assistant

For video clips and more on transmedia go to [wired.co.uk/transmedia](http://wired.co.uk/transmedia)



**2007**  
The Truth about Marika An ARG by The company P, gripped Swedish public TV and won an Emmy.

**2007**  
Year Zero Expands the dystopian world of Nine Inch Nails's sixth record into an ARG.

**2009**  
Exoriare The online comic X leads readers into an ongoing ARG that will include console games.

**2010**  
EastEnders E20 The Albert Square web series will return for a second season later this year.