

Narrative Franchises: Learning from Immersive Story Worlds

Sam Ford

Many television series today are becoming the key text around which a transmedia franchise is organized. The chief force behind this model is serialization. In the comic book world, Marvel revolutionized superhero narratives in comics by creating a story that connected from one issue to the next, even if loosely so at times. A similar transformation can be seen over time in primetime television narrative, from loosely connected plots as the norm in primetime television's early boom, moving toward the current model, in which a variation of "previously on" has become a staple.

I've spent a significant amount of time researching what I've come to call "immersive story worlds," narratives that are so vast, both in duration and frequency of primary text, that no one can truly master them. These franchises share a number of characteristics, chief among them that they facilitate particularly "engaged" fan communities in part because keeping up with the details and nuance of the text requires the collective intelligence of multiple viewers/readers.

Among the texts I'd qualify as most wholly "immersive" in this regard, two of the three are television-based (with the Marvel and DC superhero universes being the outlier), and all three have been around for decades. The U.S. soap opera has, I'd argue, best proven the potential of television narrative, and much of the reason narrative franchises today are becoming television-based has to do with creators gradually incorporating aspects of soap opera storytelling in primetime shows and marrying them with the more immediately satisfying (and conclusive) single-episode arcs and the higher production values expected of primetime series.

But soap operas have not developed significantly as franchises. Attempts at transmedia storytelling have shown some success, but these shows create very little in the way of profitable ancillary content. The series is never made available on DVD. Most of the video from the archive that is available is fan-supplied. There's little in the way of merchandising (no *The Bold and the Beautiful* video games expected anytime soon). My guess is that part of the reason has to do with the stereotype for who the soap opera audience is, with the assumption that narrative franchises aren't aimed at housewives. Part of it is that merchandising, as the industry has conceived it, sells best for action, fantasy, and children's properties. And, likewise, the lack of franchising developing around a soap opera text has to do with the history of soap operas, created as a programming vehicle for household products and envisioned from the beginning as an end point itself, rather than a vehicle for driving further content and ancillary texts/products.

For me, pro wrestling is the exemplar when it comes to a narrative franchise most fully stretching across multiple media forms. Whereas soap operas were seen as an end, pro wrestling—from the beginning of television—saw its TV show as the means to an end. Pro wrestling TV shows have always been designed as a transmedia exercise, to set up

characters and narratives that would drive viewers to the local arena for a big grudge match.

Over time, the process has switched, with TV becoming the primary driving force of the narrative and pay-per-view events being the monthly climax. However, the principle remains the same. World Wrestling Entertainment produces 5 hours of first-run television each week, which is simultaneously a live event as well. Gaps in the narrative are filled in through the WWE Web site, which becomes a storytelling device for the fictional world. The narrative is further developed by fan sites and an intense desire for speculation and rumors about the narrative (and backstage politics). WWE has built magazines, video games, ARG-esque experiences, merchandising, films, CDs, DVDs, a video-on-demand channel featuring content from the archive, fan events, etc., as part of this transmedia experience for decades.

In a way, then, while the television show has moved into the position of primary text, it still acts as a vehicle, now as much for selling the franchise as a whole than particular pay-per-view events or live arena experiences. Partially because it marries longstanding sport fan traditions with fictional narrative, the WWE has created an unparalleled franchise, through which television drives a narrative that progresses every day, across multiple TV channels and touch points in almost every media form, with no off-season. The pro wrestling media franchise, then, is a crucial text for understanding how the central narrative might operate for a highly serialized, hyper-franchised media property.