

## Comics Across Media

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#### Leading the Transmedia Revolution: Comics and Other Media

Technologies for easy access and repetition, such as DVD players and video on demand, have led television producers to more complex narrative forms, from the ensemble style to the epic story arc. Graphic novels certainly fit this pattern, allowing us to propose an interstitial placement for such work, not between print and cinema, but between the old regimes of cinema and press and the electronic frontiers of the internet. When examining the importance of comics and comic storytelling to other media over the past several years, especially as writers move among mediums which also include video games and film, it becomes apparent that storytelling in comics has served as a precursor to transmedia narratives and the expertise of comic creators is being harnessed as television has begun to shift into the transmedia sphere.

Permanence and long-term continuity may be one of the greater strengths of comic book universes. Fans see the stories in the Marvel and DC universes connected in complex ways, a trend that has been in place since the 1960s when fans demanded continuity across not only the installments of the same superhero narratives but also of all the superhero franchises produced by that company. Stories in comics are characterized by such things as seriality, long-term continuity, a character backlog, contemporary ties to a deep history, and a sense of permanence. The superhero genre anticipates the focus on immersive and expansive storyworlds, and world building is the part of the structuring logic of transmedia franchises. Now television increasingly depends on complexity rather than simplicity, specifically shows like *Lost*, which necessitated its own wiki site in order to track the volume of information. Yet comics also demonstrate that no matter how complicated superhero narratives may feel to the uninitiated, they are not nearly enough to satisfy their most demanding fans, a precipice that must be navigated by television producers as well.

It might first seem surprising that comic creators would be leading the movement towards transmedia in television, but with the long history of comics incorporating transmedia elements, the idea that writers in their thirties who grew up when such ideas were endemic to the form and thus internalized them would be able to exploit those skills in a new medium seems anything but farfetched. I've already mentioned that continuity is a defining principle of transmedia and comic narrative, but multiplicity, using the same characters in different stories that deviate from the original plot (or metaplot) is another. Today this is all around in comics, with projects like Marvel's *Zombies* and DC's *Elseworlds*, yet Marvel was producing their *What If?* line by the late 1970s, placing it well ahead of television in this respect. Both media are able to exploit an audience's familiarity with the thematic or character conventions of a genre to help fill in and add nuance. But rather than flatten characters into stereotypes, the multiplicity principle in fact allow for deeper and more complex developments because they give these stories the freedom to render characters and themes more suggestively rather than spelling everything out.

Seriality and world building are also primary transmedia concepts which can be traced back in both television and comics for many years. But when comics were becoming more and more serialized in the 70s, television was still producing shows like *Hawaii Five-O* and later *TJ Hooker* in which the milieu remained the same even as guest stars who were seemingly important, such as a love interest for the lead, would disappear without reference. Subjectivity is also a cornerstone of transmedia narrative. Telling the story from different points of view is one of the major ways in which transmedia is being explored by more conservative media. The recent *Star Trek* film used comics to fill in the backstory for both the elder Spock and villain Nero, and the television series *Heroes* used webcomics to provide backstory and points of view for characters that would have been impossible to do on the show itself.

Comics and graphic novels can be read as a medium for rapid prototyping for new content strategies that will soon reshape the rest of the entertainment industry. They are relatively cheap to produce by comparison with television, video games, or feature films. The turnaround from conception to production is rapid: trends impact comics first. Comics are fighting for survival and so are taking more risks that more stable media would avoid, placing them on the cutting edge of transmedia development. They are constantly testing new markets, putting a new twist on familiar genre conventions, demonstrating how and why comics have become so influential to other media.