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To cite this article: Renira Rampazzo Gambarato & Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasiuk (2015): Transmedia storytelling panorama in the Russian media landscape, Russian Journal of Communication

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2015.1121789>



Published online: 16 Dec 2015.



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Transmedia storytelling panorama in the Russian media landscape

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(Received 12 January 2015; accepted 9 April 2015)

Transmedia storytelling (TS) refers to media experiences expanded across multiple platforms. This article answers the research question about the specificity of Russian TS initiatives. The goal of the research is to emphasize the social and cultural contexts in which TS is inserted in Russia by reconstructing the panorama of the Russian transmedia landscape. The qualitative research is methodologically supported by an analysis of documents and materials regarding transmedia projects in Russia and presents an interdisciplinary theoretical approach (1) to explore the concept of TS and the variability of terminology in different contexts; (2) to situate the discussion of TS in the contemporary Russian media landscape and above all (3) to investigate examples of transmedia projects in Russia. Since TS is just emerging in Russian media and culture, the article concentrates on mapping the Russian transmedia landscape.

Keywords: contemporary Russian media landscape; panorama; Russia; social change; transmedia storytelling

Introduction

In the realm of the Russian media landscape, multimedia is clearly emphasized, while the very phrase “transmedia storytelling” (TS) is seldom mentioned, without a precise understanding of both concepts. The term multimedia is popular, and media professionals as well as scholars and officials are eager to use multimedia as a universal prefix. Although multimedia denotes the combined use of text, audio and visual and no more, other assumptions about the concept are common, and in Russia, the term multimedia can also refer to TS.

From the authors’ viewpoint, the explanation for this scenario lies not only in late modernization, which is described by leading Russian sociologists (Dubin, 2011; Gudkov, 2011) as a crucial feature of contemporary Russian culture, but also (and connected to the former) in the low level of civic activity, narrow choices for community actions and passive audience, which still mostly consists of viewers (even if they are Internet users) but not participants.

Nevertheless, we foresee that the future of Russian media is connected to TS. The Russian media landscape, as an economic project as well as a social initiative, will not be competitive and successful without contemporary multiplatform storytelling and without the engagement of active, creative and widely participatory audiences and communities.

This article answers the research question about the specificity of Russian TS initiatives. The goal of the research is to emphasize the social and cultural contexts in which TS is inserted in

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Russia, reconstructing the panorama of the Russian transmedia landscape. In addition, the rationale for the research is to investigate the implications of transmedia tools in different spheres, including Entertainment and Gaming, Political Movements, Social Change, Activism, Journalism and Branding as the main directions of transmedia strategies in Russia. The article highlights the specifics of civic engagement and participatory culture in contemporary Russia and emphasizes TS as implying grassroots initiatives. The qualitative research is methodologically supported by the analysis of documents and materials regarding transmedia projects in Russia and presents an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to (1) explore the concept of TS and the variability of terminology in different contexts (Dena, 2009; Gambarato, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2009), (2) to situate the discussion about TS in the contemporary Russian media landscape (Guseinov, Akhmetova, & Belikov, 2014; Kiriya, Kachkayeva, Naumova, & Rogers, 2012; Koltsova & Scherbak, 2014; Lapina-Kratasiuk, 2012; Zvereva, 2012) and above all (3) to investigate the possible examples of transmedia projects in Russia (Dolgoplov, 2012; Sokolova, 2011). The transmedia examples presented in the article were selected according to their relevance, penetration and visibility in the country. Since TS is just emerging in Russian media and culture, the article concentrates on mapping the Russian transmedia landscape.

Elusive concepts regarding transmediality

TS refers to media experiences expanded across multiple platforms. However, the definition is still open. Starting with the word transmedia itself, the Latin prefix *trans-* means beyond, through, transverse, conveying the idea of transcendence. Therefore, the word transmedia then goes beyond, transcending various media (Gambarato, 2013, p. 82). Long stresses the relevance of considering the term transmedia as “an adjective, not a noun” (2007, p. 32), which implies that transmedia should be a word that describes and qualifies a substantive. In this sense, in 1991 Kinder named “commercial supersystems of transmedia intertextuality” (1991, p. 3) franchises distributed on multiple media platforms.

Earlier allusions to the term can be traced. For instance, the renowned journalist Levin (1970) named one chapter of his book *The pendulum years: Britain in the sixties* “Transmedia and the message”. The book portrayed the *zeitgeist* of Britain life at the time. Nevertheless, the term TS was coined by Jenkins (2003) and his well-known definition that a “transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (2006, p. 95–96) came later.

Evans adds that “in this approach the non-televisual (or filmic) elements of the text are not produced as secondary to a primary source; they are instead part of a synergetic whole” (2011, p. 28). In addition to the theoretical definition of TS, is there a unified set of guidelines for the practice of developing transmedia experiences? Tentatively, yes. However, it is controversial. In 2010, the Producers Guild of America (PGA) presented a more pragmatic characterization of what transmedia productions include:

A Transmedia Narrative project or franchise must consist of three (or more) narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe on any of the following platforms: Film, Television, Short Film, Broadband, Publishing, Comics, Animation, Mobile, Special Venues, DVD/Blu-ray/CD-ROM, Narrative Commercial and Marketing rollouts, and other technologies that may or may not currently exist. These narrative extensions are NOT the same as repurposing material from one platform to be cut or repurposed to different platforms. (2012)

The Guild’s initiative to recognize the role of transmedia producers was applauded by scholars and media professionals. Nevertheless, the PGA’s proposed definition reignited the debate about

the elusive concept of TS and caused controversy. The definition generated the following main critiques: (1) the definition is too restrictive, (2) three narrative storylines are the strict minimum (why not two, for instance?), (3) it favors franchises to the detriment of other TS types and (4) video games¹ are omitted from the list of media platforms.

Other authors contributed to the understanding and dissemination of TS. Scolari, for instance, considers it “a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.)” (2009, p. 587). Dena emphasizes the storyworld unfolding across media platforms (2009, p. 18), and Renira Gambarato proposes that:

a transmedia narrative tells altogether one big pervasive story, attracting audience engagement. It is not about offering the same content in different media platforms, but it is the worldbuilding experience, unfolding content and generating the possibilities for the story to evolve with new and pertinent content. (2013, p. 82)

Cross-media is another term frequently and broadly used to characterize multiplatform phenomena. The prefix *cross-* indicates movement and carries on the idea of intersection, which implies that the compound word cross-media denotes various media that intersect each other (Gambarato, 2013, p. 83). Largely used among media professionals, cross-media is a broader term compared to TS in the sense that cross-media generically embraces media production across multiple platforms, while TS emphasizes the narrative dimension with the specificity of content expansion. Phillips stresses that “cross-media refers to releasing the same content (...) over multiple platforms” (2012, p. 19).

The terminology issue also depends on the country and/or region. For instance, in the UK, the term multiplatform media production is favored instead of TS (Bennett, Strange, Kerr, & Mercado, 2012). Multiplatform, in the same direction as cross-media, is a broader concept that embraces a wide range of media production spread throughout several media platforms.

The terms are organically evolving in step with the society in which they are inserted. Thus, how are the terms reflected in Russia? In the context of the contemporary Russian media landscape, as explored in the following section, the pervasive use of the term multimedia seems to prevail to the detriment of others. Multimedia denotes the combined use of text, audio and visual, but other assumptions about the concept are common, including the one that considers multimedia and multiplatform synonyms. In this sense, it is understandable that such a popular (and older) term gained ground in Russia. However, the national interest in media experiences expanded across multiple platforms, which are far more enriching than the original meaning of multimedia, is growing exponentially. In 2012, the Russia Forum invited Caitlin Burns and Lance Weiler to discuss TS as a new language for a new audience. Burns is a transmedia producer at Starlight Runner Entertainment, the pioneering American company led by Jeff Gomez. Weiler – writer, director and experience designer – is one of the most prominent practitioners dedicated to interactive storytelling. He is behind innovative transmedia projects such as *Pandemic 1.0* and *Collapsus*. In 2013, Moscow MIPAcademy hosted a panel entitled *Transmedia Stories and Multiplatform Content Monetization Models* and the IDEA! 17th National Ad Festival, in Novosibirsk, offered a master-class about TS delivered by Ekaterina Nazarova, the STS [CTC] media producer of *True Love* (Настоящая Любовь) [Настоящая Любовь], a Russian transmedia production. In February 2014, STS Media announced the formation of a Department of Transmedia Projects aiming at enhancing the group’s Internet and digital media presence. Slashcheva, STS Media CEO, stresses:

Multiplatform content consumption is an important trend in media development, opening up new opportunities for scaling up the audience, promoting television brands and monetizing unique content. Creation of new development will allow integration of all digital and transmedia projects with TV business. CTC Media has become Russia's pioneer in cross-platform projects and continues active development of this area, which is one of our key strategic priorities. (CTC Media, 2014)

The latest developments in the Russian media landscape are gradually absorbing the term TS and the concept the term depicts. Above all, Miller (2008) reinforces that, because of the newness of the field, the terminology has yet to be improved. Independently of the preferred terminology, she concludes that the phenomenon behind the term adheres to the same basic principles. TS is about the expansion – instead of repetition – of content; it is a reality and a tendency worldwide, and Russia is not beyond this scope.

Context of contemporary Russian media landscape

The Russian media landscape can be described as contradictory:

Why has new media ultimately been unable to considerably influence public opinion? The reasons for this phenomenon are to be found within a deep split between different social groups and, consequently, between two public spheres with very different media usage patterns. It means that, according to our hypothesis, the main public sphere is organised around traditional media whereas the parallel public sphere is organised around new media. (Kiriya, 2014, p. 131)

One of the freest Internets in the world (at least until recently) is surrounded by traditional media (television, radio, print) with strictly government-controlled television as the core of the entire system. Russia is one of the fastest-growing regions of Internet users in the world: 74% of people older than 18 watch TV practically every day (“Vremia u televizora”, 2014). Lev Gudkov, the head of Levada Center,² states that 94–95% of Russian citizens receive information primarily from TV (“Lev Gudkov: Ukraina zaslonila vse”, 2014); thus, Russia is a country of TV viewers (or more precisely viewers of Russian state television). Consequently, for the majority of Russian citizens, television is still the main source of information and entertainment.

The trends of the developing media system in Russia are both global and local. On the one hand, Russia survived the “Mobile Revolution”, concluding the triple revolution of social network, Internet and mobile as described by Rainie and Wellman (2014). Mobile telephones and other gadgets have become widespread and have challenged the popularity of laptops as tools for connecting to the Net. As a result, mobile applications and location-based services, different navigation tools, maps and urban spatial social networks such as Foursquare have become extremely popular in Russia. Thus, the structure of Net use and media use in general in Russia has changed: people relate their communication to their spatial practices; have obtained the habit of watching TV and binge-watching favorite shows on their smartphones; network everywhere and tweet, vote and react without the necessary presence of the stationary computer. This media scenario provides more opportunity for TS to develop in Russia because of the multiplatform nature and participatory character, which is especially achieved by digital and mobile technologies.

On the other hand, 2014 has become disastrous for the Russian Internet (Runet) [Рунет]. The numerous attempts to control the Runet through several laws, which limit Internet use in Russian territory, were ratified; many Internet companies or resources such as RIA Novosti [РИА Новости] and Gazeta.ru were either closed or now controlled by new top management. Most laws and restrictions are aimed specifically at limiting the Runet, but vertical control over media content and media consumption has spread in contemporary Russia. The fact that the

Runet now suffers more than other media is easily explained by the relative freedom the Runet had experienced until recently compared to other media (e.g. television), most of which were taken under control several years ago.

Actually, technology is flourishing, but has not been fully accompanied by social and cultural change. TS in Russia could be explained by Gambarato (2014): “Russia is in the middle of the multimedia boom, while transmedia have only emerged here.”

What does this mean in terms of the recent trends in the Russian media landscape? One of the main components of TS projects, which is associated with participatory culture, cannot easily develop in contemporary Russia, since the Russian Internet is now under numerous restrictions and heavy surveillance. Under-developed participatory culture combined with great public interest in any media and technical innovations influence producers to choose projects with a high level of novelty but a low level of audience participation and user-generated content (UGC). Therefore, highly technological multimedia projects with mostly viewers, not users or prosumers in the audience, have become popular, at least in major Russian cities, while multiplatform grassroots initiatives are looked at with suspicion by the government, producers and even the public. Consequently, paraphrasing Jenkins, who stated that “The technological determinants of interactivity (which is most often prestructured or at least enabled by the designer) contrasts with the social and cultural determinants of participation (which is more open ended and more fully shaped by consumer choices)” (2006, p. 328), there are more interactive forms (such as multimedia stories and interactive experiences on former RIA Novosti³) than participatory ones (as multi-user games, social and civic engagement initiatives).

For example, the biggest projects in Russia, such as *The Golden Age of the Russian Avant-Garde* [Золотой век русского авангарда] (created by Peter Greenaway and Saskia Boddeke for the Moscow Exhibition Hall Manezh) and *Alien Land: Chernobyl and Its Neighborhood 28 Years After* [Земля отчуждения: Чернобыль и его окрестности спустя 28 лет после аварии] (<http://www.kommersant.ru/projects/chernobyl>), are mainly multimedia. Although large-scale multimedia projects are a crucial part of contemporary Russian digital culture, they are beyond the scope of this article, which is TS.

Regarding media studies in contemporary Russia, recent research has mainly been dedicated to either television (Novikova, 2013; Strukov & Zvereva, 2014) or the Runet. In the field of Internet studies, relevant work has been published; among the latest works are those by Zvereva (2012), Guseinov et al. (2014), Davydov, Logunova, and Petrova (2014) and Koltsova and Scherbak (2014). Social and cultural consequences of Runet vs. Russian TV controversial unity have also become the center of scholarly discussion (Kiriya, 2014; Kiriya et al., 2012; Lapina-Kratasiuk, 2012), but multiplatform initiatives have been studied as multimedia.

Currently, more dynamic, internationally recognized and diversified research is being conducted in new media/digital media studies. For more than 10 years, the Russian Internet has been the topic of interest at many prominent institutions, such as the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, Oxford University, Lotman-Institut für russische Kultur at Ruhr University and King’s College London, among others. Russian institutions have also contributed widely to this field; the Center for New Media and Society, the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and Moscow State University are among the most productive. The range of research projects on new media in Russia is wide, from the impact of online social networks on political participation in Russia and media freedom to the perception of interactive media and the meaning of selfies. Although Russian new media studies, as an instrument of oppositional political expression, had been the most popular until recently, scholars have now turned more to an array of technological, social, aesthetic and economic topics. This tide is explained only partly by the threat of direct surveillance by the authorities, and is motivated by the desire to reveal the strong influence the digital revolution has had on the everyday life and

cognitive style of contemporary society. Therefore, themes such as Big Data analytics, crowd-sourcing, digitalization of civic engagement and new media in urban space have been in the spotlight recently. These themes are directly connected to TS tools and have contributed to starting the development of TS among Russian producers and researchers. However, only a few works on TS have been published in Russian (Dolgoplov, 2012; Sokolova, 2009, 2011).

Transmedia initiatives in Russia

Entertainment and gaming

TS is globalized, and initiatives related to entertainment and gaming are also being experienced in Russia. The current research identifies projects such as *True Love*, *The Voice* (Golos) [Голос], *Night Watch* (Nochnoi dozor) [Ночной дозор] and *Big Bag* (Bol'shoi chemodan) [Большой чемодан] as transmedia stories produced locally.

True Love is a transmedia TV and Web series created by STS Media and initially broadcast on the STS Channel in November and December 2012. This media corporation, which specializes in entertainment, is the largest publicly traded television broadcaster in Russia (Khrennikov, 2014). *True Love* gave television viewers the opportunity to share their own love stories on major Russian social media networks (VKontakte and Odnoklassniki) [ВКонтакте и Одноклассники] and on the STS Media online video platform videomore.ru, which follows the Hulu⁴ model (service offering ad-supported on-demand streaming video).

In the first stage of the project, Internet users uploaded text, photos and/or videos of their love stories on Web sources related to *True Love*. Participants also commented on and rated the stories. Within a few months, 2000 stories had been gathered online, and then 50 were incorporated into the project and shot as one-minute videos broadcasted daily on the STS Channel. The full version of each story (a four-minute video) was available for free on the Internet. The key characteristics of TS offered by the project were expansion of the content in different media platforms and concrete audience participation. *True Love* was planned to deliberately take advantage of the “four screen” concept (TV, PC, tablet, mobile phone), and in this sense, it succeeded. In 2013, 17.7 million smartphones, 8.5 million tablets and 3.7 smart TVs were sold in Russia (Khrennikov, 2014).

The series did not include popular actors. The strategy was to emphasize the idea of genuine love. However, it is important to highlight the partnership between *True Love* and PepsiCo, which resulted in an advertising campaign for *Liubimyĭ* [Любимый] (beloved, favorite) juice. Romanova, the marketing manager of *Liubimyĭ*, noted PepsiCo's association with the transmedia project *True Love* is related to the great desire people have to share their love stories, and thus inspire others to open their hearts. This is close to the brand philosophy: “To be loved, you have to be present” (PepsiCo, 2013). The company believes that the synergy among digital platforms in order to engage the audience in an emotional dialogue with the brand helps to efficiently convey their message. The “Transmedia story is truly addictive. Today it is one of the most effective tools available on the market to communicate with consumers” (PepsiCo, 2013).

At the end of 2013, STS, again in partnership with PepsiCo, broadcast the second season of *True Love*, which now aimed at finding the formula for true love. This time, 45 stories told by the audience were selected for the project. The main media platforms involved were the STS Channel, videomore.ru, domashniy.ru, etc.ru and again the social networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki. STS Media “is transforming itself into a content provider as users switch to watching series online via smartphones, tablets and smart TVs” (Khrennikov, 2014).

Another transmedia initiative involving a major Russian broadcaster is *The Voice*. The project, broadcast by Channel One (Pervyi kanal) [Первый канал], is based on the original Dutch format

created in 2010: *The Voice of Holland*. *The Voice* is a reality television competition that showcases singers. On the show, unknown singers are trained by four popular artists, who are their coaches/judges. The selection process involves blind auditions in which the coaches cannot see but only hear the candidates. Ultimately, the audience votes for the winner.

The first season premiered in October 2012, the second in September 2013 and the third in September 2014. The episodes are aired once a week, and immediately after the broadcast, behind-the-scene episodes are available on the Web, with the same quality of TV but exploring additional content from different angles. The social media and digital aspect of the show, such as online forums, social media discussions and online videos, are meant to create active engagement with and accessibility to the coaches and singing talent. Borodina, a TV critic, points out that *The Voice* is practically a unique event in Russian media landscape because the show is popular among regular TV viewers and Internet users, as shown by the numerous discussions of the project on different social networks (2013): “around 40 million Russian Internet users have a profile on at least one social network and 20 million are present on two or more” (Pankin, Fedotov, Richter, Alekseeva, & Osipova, 2011, p. 7). However, there is a considerable divide in Russia between TV and digital media audiences and between large cities and small towns. On the one hand,

Television audiences have been gradually shrinking, but it nevertheless continues to be the main source of information for the overwhelming majority of the population. Around 70 percent of people watch television regularly, although the choice of channels varies greatly depending on the milieu: urbanites can choose from dozens of channels, and not just terrestrial, while the rural population has access only to between two and four. (Pankin et al., 2011, p. 7)

On the other hand,

The increased availability of online information and the opportunities for e-participation are relevant only to the wired, mainly urban part of the population. A disparity exists not only between rural and urban people, but also between the high-speed broadband users and those with slower, less news consumption-friendly connections. Even though the overall internet penetration is relatively high, only 14 percent (2009) of all internet connections in Russia are broadband. (Pankin et al., 2011, p. 7)

In this context, the popularity and penetration of *The Voice* seem to have benefited from the transmedia characteristics of the project, encompassing the large Channel One audience from all around the country and the selected Internet/social media networks users concentrated in urban areas. Although there is still plenty of room for *The Voice* to extend its storyworld even more and explore specific aspects of TS such as UGC, the project (especially in the second and third seasons) has already contributed to further developments of transmedia production in Russia.

In the midst of multiplatform practices in Russia, fiction should be mentioned as a significant base and engine for developing TS initiatives. The significance of literary narrative in any type of storytelling has traditionally been high in the country. TS projects based on cult Russian-language books are among the most vital in the Russian cultural context. They have a large audience, which is participatory and actively takes part in extensions online and offline, writes fan fiction and makes fan art. The audience includes amateur actors in literary reconstructions. Nevertheless, Russian classical literature has become an immense source for TV and cinema adaptations that have flooded screens in recent years, while Russian-language science fiction and fantasy books are successful sources for TS projects. We cannot identify this trend as exclusively Russian, but the national conservative attitude toward Russian classics as sacred texts does not allow the freedom to instigate audience creativity and UGC. The remarkable exception is the project *Karenina: Live Edition* [Каренина. Живое издание] (<https://plus.google.com/+KareninaLive/about>)

sponsored by the Lev Tolstōi Museum and Google Russia. A total of 728 people read parts of Tolstōi's novel video posted on YouTube. This project exemplifies the transition between multimedia and TS in the contemporary Russian media landscape. The project is based on UGC but does not allow the audience to influence or change Tolstōi's original text.

However, in spite of the enthusiasm for global TS projects such as *Game of Thrones* and *True Blood*, the Russian community has always been eager to play with local cultural symbols in cities and places they know, for example, Moscow, Nizhnii Novgorod and even Chernobyl.

Relevant examples of TS projects associated with cult Russian books are *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Night Watch*. The introduction to the TS notion as a scholarly phenomenon in the Russian academic sphere started with an analysis of these two game-based projects (Dolgoplov, 2012; Sokolova, 2011).

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is mostly a multiuser game that exists online and offline and is very loosely connected to the novel by Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii *Roadside Picnic* (Piknik na obochine) [Пикник на обочине]. In addition, it could be argued that the game is linked to Andrei Tarkovskii film *Stalker* [Сталкер] (1979), which is also vaguely connected to the literary work it is based on, but remarkable for its atmosphere and world building (Crow, 2015). The main hero of the book (and film) makes a living by illegally entering the so-called Zone, a place that was visited by extraterrestrials and is full of unknown substances and anomalies. The game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, released by the Ukrainian game developer GSC Game World, is located in the Chernobyl zone with different groups of people and mutants fighting each other there. The game inherits from the book descriptions of anomalies and artifacts as well as the very idea of the Zone, which is easily associated with the abandoned territory around the exploded nuclear power plant. Thus, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is not an adaptation but a transmedia extension of the original text although the authors of *Roadside Picnic* are not mentioned in the game in order to avoid copyright issues.

The universe of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* was very popular between 2007 and 2010. The transmedia production included three games (the first game, a prequel and a sequel) and a series of books based on the world of the game, among the main extensions. The TV show *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* was cancelled in 2012 before it premiered. Although the production had a significant audience, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* had been practically abandoned by players, who have turned to pure MMORPGs⁵ such as *War Thunder* (<http://warthunder.ru/>) and *Allody Online* [Аллоды Онлайн] (<https://allods.mail.ru/>). A remarkable extension of this game universe is the performance of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (directed by Igor' Grigor'ev), organized as a lounge quest, which opened in October 2014 at the Gogol-Center Theatre, in Moscow.

The TS production *Night Watch* is closely connected to Sergei Luk'ianenko's cult fantasy books and the film with the same name by Timur Bekmambetov and its sequel *Day Watch* (Dnevnoi dozor) [Дневной дозор]. The TS franchise includes books, films, fan fiction and fan art, computer games and online and offline role-playing games, songs, advertising and even a parody DVD film. Luk'ianenko's books already had huge fan communities and a longer history of penetration in Russia before the films were launched, so the further multiplatform development was inherently good business. Nevertheless, only the production of the massively multiplayer online and offline role-playing game *Dozor* [Дозор] brings the transmedia element to the mostly cross-media world of *Night Watch*. On the game's website (<http://www.dzzzr.ru/>), which is an urban quest around 82 Russian cities and enigma-based online command competition, there are no hints or references to Sergei Luk'ianenko and Timur Bekmambetov's *Night Watch*, but the general idea and world building are associated with the *Night Watch* universe.

Both projects can be called transmedial since they are not only multiplatform but also develop different narrative lines and structures on different media platforms and extensions in accordance with Jenkins' characteristic of the ideal form of TS: "each medium does what it does best" (2006,

p. 98). In both projects, we also observe the difference between adaptation and extension in favor of the latter, as an extension “seeks to add something to the existing story as it moves from one medium to another” (Jenkins, 2011). In addition, the activities of communities and UGC play a crucial role in the Russian projects. On the one hand, comparing both projects, Sokolova states that *Night Watch* could potentially become really transmedial, but because it weakly expressed grassroots initiatives (particularly in comparison to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*), it did not happen (2011, p. 20). On the other hand, Dolgoplov argues: “*Night Watch* PC is not a patriotic game and yet its production context, storyworld extension across multiple gaming platforms, its ‘additive comprehension’, translation and distribution for an international market highlight its key role as a Russian national videogame” (2012, p. 62).

Sokolova believes that *Night Watch* failed because its producers did not rely enough on the principles of participatory culture, while Dolgoplov thinks that *Night Watch* succeeded, and explains its relative underdevelopment according to the conventions of contemporary Russian culture:

The informality, the discontinuity, the absence of licensing and the lack of systematic dispersal across multiple channels (despite the [production] and distribution power of ORT⁶) [were] not a failure of *Night Watch*'s transmediation, but a projection of Russian popular culture that remains bound by the simultaneous opportunities of chaotic participation, underdeveloped official “national projects” and incomplete commercialization in developing storyworlds. (2012, p. 63)

After echoing both scholars' arguments, we add that, by late 2014, participatory culture is not quite developed at the grassroots level and is systematically limited by the government. These factors could explain the recognizable failure of TS gaming projects and the concentration of gaming activity in Russia mainly online, as in the case of *War Thunder* and *Allody Online*.

Political and social spheres

TS strategies in the political and social spheres are extremely promising because it inspires civic engagement and audience participation, but it is still in its first steps. Nevertheless, Russia has been the stage for a few relevant initiatives involving civic development and improvement.

The first example is Alekseĭ Naval'nyĭ's political campaign during the 2013 mayoral elections in Moscow. As the opposition candidate, Naval'nyĭ was already a staunch activist fighting against endemic corruption in Russia. In 2010, he launched the anti-corruption website *RosPil* [РосПил] and became a digital phenomenon as an anti-corruption blogger. He did not win the election, but his participation represented advances in terms of the use of new media and cross-platform experiences. In fact, the 2013 Moscow mayoral election was the very first social media election in the country. Naval'nyĭ started campaigning using techniques that had been unknown in Russia, such as incorporating crowdfunding, fundraising online, using volunteers, meeting with voters, canvassing door-to-door and creating digital projects. As the opposition candidate, he had limited access to mainstream media, especially TV, so the online campaign and its consequent expansion into offline activities were an alternative path to reach the public.

Social media networks played an important role in directing people to Naval'nyĭ's website *navalny.ru*, which was the tentpole of the project. The campaign concentrated on VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Using transmedia strategies, Naval'nyĭ reached a larger and more diversified public through online activities (social media, blog, website, interactive map, online fundraising, etc.) and offline actions (metro campaign, traffic campaign, cubes, meetings etc.).

Within the realm of political activism, in 2012, the world watched with extreme interest the prosecution of three members of *Pussy Riot*, a Russian punk rock protest group. Several members

were part of the political street-art group *voĭna* [Война] (*war* in English). On 21 February 2012, five members of the group staged a performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The group was stopped by security officers, but their performance was turned into a music video that was released on YouTube⁷ the same day. The video had been viewed 2,875,316 times by October 2014. Their song *Punk Prayer – Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!* (Pank-moleben “Bogorodiĭsa, Putina progoni”) [Панк-молебен “Богородица, Путина прогони”] criticized Orthodox Church leaders for supporting Vladimir Putin in his presidential re-election. Three group members were arrested and charged with and convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred: one appealed and was freed on probation, and the other two women spent 21 months in prison before they received amnesty from the State Duma in December 2013.

The trial in August 2012 was the first in Russia available via webcast and received strong international criticism, especially concerning human rights issues. The prosecution motivated a comprehensive campaign against it. The American independent non-profit publisher The Feminist Press released an e-book entitled *Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom*, aiming at raising funds to pay for the convicted women’s legal defense. The book contains lyrics written by the band, letters and materials from the trial, in addition to tributes from personalities such as Yoko Ono. A printed version of the book was published in 2013 with new content.

Amnesty International launched *Free Pussy Riot*, a petition signed by the most famous musicians in the world, such as Madonna, Paul McCartney, Elton John, Björk and U2, calling for the release of the two jailed members of the group (2013). In January 2013, the documentary film *Pussy Riot – A Punk Prayer* produced in the UK was released. The film debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and later was broadcasted by HBO in the US and by BBC in the UK. The documentary features interviews with family members and the court proceedings but does not include interviews with the imprisoned members of the band themselves (Sundance Institute, 2013). The documentary was short listed for the 2014 Academy Award but was not nominated.

The *Pussy Riot* prosecution stimulated an enormous amount of UGC. People started creating art objects, t-shirts, posters, guerrilla actions, Internet memes and illustrations, for instance. In February 2014, the two freed members participated in the Amnesty International concert in New York with Madonna. Later, their presence during the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi revived the controversy surrounding the protest group. The media developments around *Pussy Riot* expanded far from the initial viral video clip performed inside the cathedral. Two years later, it is clear that a whole transmedia universe embracing the band’s saga had taken the world by storm. Multiple media platforms are used to tell the band’s ongoing protest story and, moreover, *Pussy Riot* has its narrative organically unfolded and extended mainly by the active participation of the public. These aspects characterize TS.

Activism

Following these examples of oppositional political movements, we could go farther and expand the very notion of political in order to embrace activism and actionism. There is now a significant divide between official politics in Russia, represented by the established system of political parties and institutions, and grassroots civic engagement, movements that aim at achieving diverse local improvement. In general, the trend is global (Castells, 2012; Castells, Caraca, & Cardoso, 2012), but the specificity of this divide in Russia is in the absence of the middle layer, which could be represented by strong political opposition with the ability to influence the decision-making process. Thus, in practice official politics and grassroots movements do not communicate with each other.

As for the TS use on both political poles, official politics is reluctant to use transmedia tools, especially tries to avoid participatory democracy and prefers the controlled replication of content

across different media platforms. However, TS has become the main form of action and involvement for civic engagement movements.

For instance, the main multiplatform resources that represent the government in Russia are the websites of the president of Russia (<http://www.kremlin.ru>) and the Russian government (<http://government.ru/>). Updated technological innovations are used in the structure and design of the websites: there are video and video blog sections, radio and podcasts, photo galleries; even archaic types of media, such as telegrams and stenographs, are included; and there are versions of the websites for visually impaired citizens. TV news on central channels mostly replicates the information available on these official websites. With the same design style and structure, both websites offer limited audience participation (in fact, there are only moderated forums) and under strict surveillance.

In contrast, the way activists communicate with their audience is very flexible and diverse; there is no explicit border between the producers and the audience. Remarkably, in Russian transmedia activism television is excluded (while most other Russian TS projects have television as the tentpole), and its role is replaced by the city space. The main narratives, which are extended throughout multiple media platforms, are normally created offline through artistic interventions, flash mobs, and performances.

The activist group *Partizaning* [Партизанинг] (<http://partizaning.org/>), for instance, is a grassroots politically sensitive initiative aiming at concretely re-planning local urban spaces, attracting the attention of city dwellers to urban and human problems and, as a result, creating responsible citizens. The group's activities are centered on art or urban interventions (Rendell, 2006), artistic performances aimed at attracting public attention to certain social or urban issues and involving citizens in the problem-solving process. The civic engagement promoted by *Partizaning* is connected to the meaning of civic as civil but also as city-based, implying the problematization of urban activism. Among the group's DIY⁸ actions, there are environmental initiatives, such as promoting more eco-friendly environments, constructing public benches and self-made bike-stands, artistic performances, such as street art, and social actions, such as revitalizing public libraries and abandoned houses, and reconstructing market places. Moreover, all of *Partizaning's* actions have a strong (micro) political expressiveness:

Today the active citizens are not inclined to consider art as a closed system working for itself. They use art language as an instrument of reality's improvement, starting with urban furniture repairing and finishing with the struggle for new forms of political system. (n.d.)

To achieve the aims of critical urbanism, the members of *Partizaning* use different media platforms. They travel frequently and visually document their interventions on video and in photo essays, participate in festivals of documentary films, publish and review books, widely share their actions and the works of other activists and actionists in social networks and printed magazines. Thus, the new urban narrative is born through TS complexity, which includes the city space as one of the main communication platforms.

Journalism

Various media platforms are naturally involved in journalism. However, it does not necessarily work in transmedia strategies mainly because most news productions distributed across different platforms repurpose content instead of expanding it. In Russia, multimedia journalism has prominent initiatives, such as the news production from RIA Novosti, featuring high-quality interactive maps, videos, photos and textual materials. Nevertheless, transmedia journalism examples are more difficult to find. As a possible deliberate attempt at a transmedial approach to journalism

in Russia, we refer to the coverage of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games. In Russia, an autonomous non-profit organization called ANO Sports Broadcasting was created to be the local broadcaster of the Games. It encompassed three channels: Channel One, Russia 1 [Россия 1] and the satellite broadcaster NTV+ [HTB+]. The channels shared broadcast time.

The Russian official Olympic broadcast was spread throughout TV broadcasting, online live streaming, special Olympic website olymp.ltv.ru, social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki), and iOS and Android mobile applications. In terms of content, the social networks focused on announcements and reports of TV broadcasting and online streaming, news about the results and medal count, questions to be discussed, polls, contests and photo reports. The TV broadcasts concentrated on the sport competitions, news produced directly in the studio in Sochi, talk shows and documentaries. The online live streaming amplified the content aired on TV with six streaming channels broadcasting sport events without comments or narration. In addition to replicating the television news, the website published breaking news before it was aired on TV. The mobile applications mainly displayed the completion schedule, medal count and news.

Major sporting events such as Olympic Games motivate UGC, and Sochi was the subject of numerous Internet memes, parodies, illustrations, games and more. In addition to interest in sports, the Winter Games attracted massive attention because of the economic, political, social and security issues that surrounded the event.

Few transmediatic features were observed in the journalist coverage of Sochi Olympic Games: modest content expansion was presented and interaction with the audience existed but was limited. Nevertheless, Russian journalism is aware and is part of the multiplatform production development worldwide.

Branding

Transmedia branding is new in Russia, but has quickly become popular because of the public's obsession with mobile applications and mistrust of traditional forms of advertising.

Red Quest, the promotional action of MTS⁹ new tariff Red Energy, is designed as TS, combining the merits of international branding projects, such as Intel & Toshiba *The Power Inside* and traditions of Russian TS games such as *Dozor*. The main narrative of *Red Quest* is saving the planet. Participants search for the source of unlimited energy. The game has two phases. The first is an online quiz, and the second is an offline city quest made with the help of smartphones. The declared aim of the company is "to increase the level of the target audience's involvement and strengthen their communication with the brand by transmitting MTS Red Energy tariff values – freedom of expression, activeness, energy, and unlimited possibilities of communication" ("V MTS rasskazali o keise Red Quest", 2011).

Videos and photos of participants involved in the city quest as well as their stories were widely shared on blogs, websites and social networks. Mobile phones were crucial for those who participated in the quest, since all assignments and codes were sent via SMS and *Red Quest* mobile application.

The company MTS claimed to be very satisfied with the commercial results of the project since sales increased by 20% and more than 800,000 people installed the mobile application *Red Quest* through the social network VKontakte ("V MTS rasskazali o keise Red Quest", 2011).

Conclusion

A question that may rise is why transmedia stories are becoming more popular worldwide. Ryan (2013) suggests several insights: (1) it is a matter of money (developers want us to consume as many products as possible). (2) It is a response to the proliferation of media and electronic

gadgets. (3) It is about the power of transmedia stories to create communities. (4) The audience can decide how far they want to explore the storyworld. (5) Downloadable media allow the audience to have a less rigid schedule to experience the story. (6) The return of cognitive investment, that is, it takes energy to be engaged but once the audience is immersed in the experience, it is natural to continue within the storyworld.

How about the particularities of Russia in this context? The research findings point in the following directions: (1) TS productions often have high level of novelty within the context of Russian media landscape and relatively low level of audience participation and UGC. (2) Transmedia producers offer more opportunities of interaction (when the audience can relate to the project somehow, but cannot co-create and change the story) and less participation. (3) The traditionally high significance of fictional literary narratives foments the development of transmedia projects specially inspired by science fiction and fantasy Russian storyworlds. (4) Russia is a country of TV viewers and the most outstanding TS outlets are produced by major national broadcaster, such as Channel One. (5) Apart from television, mobile technologies and location-based services are in vogue in the country, which facilitates the penetration of transmedia projects in urban areas. (6) TS strategies work as an alternative for projects based on grassroots civic engagement, which normally have restricted access to mass media, particularly television. (7) Although technology is flourishing in Russia in the realm of TS, the social and cultural change mindsets are still to be developed in the country.

Why does TS have the potential to grow in the country? It could be considered: (1) the country has significant Internet penetration. Overall, Russia has a monthly Internet audience of more than 56% of the adult population. In cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, 94% have Internet access at home (Yandex, 2013, p. 2). (2) The technological resources are available. For instance, Russia has *Яндекс* [Яндекс], the fourth largest search engine worldwide (Bonfils, 2013). (3) Large broadcasters are already signaling large investments in this direction. Channel One started working on an Internet-based TV channel, *Pervyi Digital* [Первый Digital] (RIA Novosti, 2013), and in April 2014 announced the creation of a new department responsible for expanding the channel's content across different media platforms (Kitaeva, 2014). STS Media also created a Transmedia Projects Department in 2014 in order to enhance its Internet and digital media presence and become a content provider across different platforms (CTC Media, 2014). (4) TS projects are already part of the Russian media landscape, as the body of research shows, with diversified applications of transmedia techniques in fictional and non-fictional initiatives. Therefore, the prospect of transmedia strategies in the contemporary Russian media landscape is to grow and to improve rapidly.

In addition, the development of TS in Russia is relevant not only for commercial purposes but also for improvements in the social, political and media realms because (1) TS projects help overcome the television vs. Internet divide characteristic of the Russian media system (e.g. *The Voice* succeeded in this task), (2) TS strategies are used by activists and artists in order to encourage civic engagement development in Russia and (3) TS tools contribute to changing the passive audience paradigm, introducing the Russian audience to contemporary forms of participatory culture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. The PGA already announced that video games were excluded from the list of potential media by mistake and the list will be amended to include games.

2. The Levada Center is a Russian non-governmental research organization, one of the largest Russian centers in the field. The Center regularly conducts sociological research.
3. RIA Novosti is one of the biggest and most crucial news agencies in Russia. On 9 December 2013, the agency was officially closed, and all its rights were given to the Russia Today international agency. However, in October 2014, RIA Novosti continues its work under the old name (<http://ria.ru/>), but with a new team and new editorial policy.
4. STS Media CEO Yuliana Slashcheva states that “we’re following the Hulu model since Russian viewers are traditionally reluctant to pay for content subscription. (...) We expect this to change in one or two years, once global online-content distributors enter the Russian market” (Khrennikov, 2014).
5. MMORPG means Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.
6. ORT is the old name for Channel One.
7. Access *Pussy Riot* music video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCasuaAczKY>.
8. Do it yourself. *Partizaning* group members also use the DIY IT term to show the difference between traditional DIY and the contemporary technologically rich form.
9. MTS is one of the biggest mobile operators in Russia.

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