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*Transmedia Revolution:
Living in an Ecosystem of Alternative Realities*



Transmedia Revolution: Living In An Ecosystem Of Alternative Realities

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Keynote Speaker & Special Guest

«What if the person you see in front of you was not human, but the simulated presence of a human being? Could I be a very realistic hologram deceiving your senses? Let's emphasize this ontological doubt by suggesting I could be an android, a mimetic artificial being exhibiting complex behaviors and self-awareness. What if each of you was currently unaware of being connected to a Virtual Reality engine generating this *simulacrum*? How would you be able to tell who in the crowd is a human subject, and who is a simulated agent?

In the field of Science Fiction, such ontological doubts reflect the mindsets of characters immersed in digital realities, or struggling with the deceiving appearances of a post-human world. In the Ridley Scott movie Blade Runner (1982), Rick Deckard is a chase-hunter of «replicants», tracking intelligent and highly mimetic androids. While the movie was based on Philip K. Dick's novel, in which Deckard is beyond any doubts a human being, Scott suggests Deckard could be a replicant himself, unaware of his own nature. Embodying a human being in the novel, and eventually suspected to be an android in the movie, the character's evolution in time is paradigmatic of a transformation of subjectivity induced by the digital revolution. The nascent doubt about Deckard's ontogeny reveals the ongoing influence over our imagination of an artificialist logic which displaces metaphysical matters on the side of technology. It also designates the exponential coexistence and interweaving of realities, and of identities, inherent in cyberculture.

By permeating, and at some point interchanging, real and virtual features, subjects and objects, the natural and the artificial, the post-digital semiotic order suggests a mutation of our hierarchy of symbolic representation.

While metamorphosis and telepresence were once symbolic traits held by demiurges, they today belong to the realm of algorithms, procedures and digital interfaces. Interestingly, the mystical second dimension of the world, which Herbert Marcuse regretted the absorption of within images of consumerism, returns as a technologically processed hyperreality. Evidence of this tendency lays before our eyes, in the generic word for digital embodiment: 'avatar'. Originating from sanskrit, the word means 'multiple reincarnations of Vishnu on planet Earth'.

In an anticipation of these transformations, the dialectic of the real and its *simulacrum* is prominent in Science Fiction movies. It is often addressed in the form of meta-diegetic narratives, sustaining that *the real* must be conquered through an epic crossing of alternative realities. In the movie Avalon (2001) Japanese director Mamoru Oshii represents a kaleidoscopic world in which the real is a pure virtuality. A promised land only accessible to hardcore gamers reaching the ultimate level of a fully immersive virtual game. As in David Cronenberg's movie eXistenZ (1999) Avalon unfolds as an allegory of the virtual.

In both cases, the plot takes place in a simulated world where the real has become a Holy Grail, ultimately reachable through a transmigration in digital bodies. Coincidentally, final access to the real remains uncertain and impregnated with mystical and mythical features. Ash, the main character of Avalon finds herself entering a theater hall where is performed the aria of the Nine Sisters of the Arthurian Legend. In the movie eXistenZ, Cronenberg shoots the last scene in a church, where a secondary character suddenly addresses the camera to ask: «Are we still in the game?».

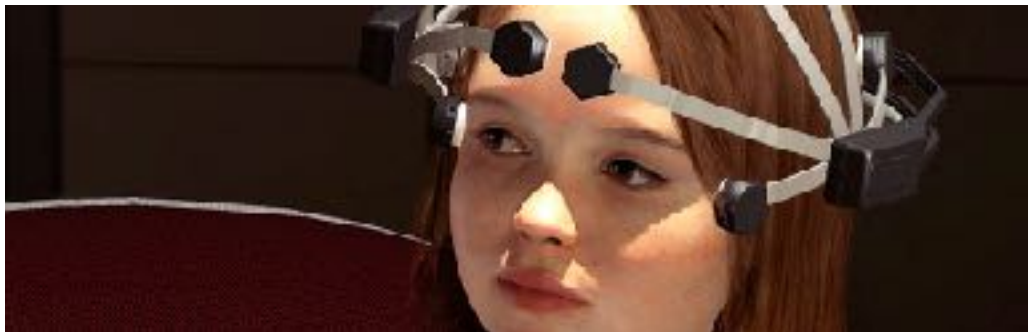


© Avalon, Mamoru Oshii, 2001.

These fictional situations mirror less a technological determinism, than they magnify the ongoing merging of virtual and physical worlds horizons. While social philosophy of the 90s feared a disappearance of the real behind its simulacrum, real and virtual actually complement and expand each other by giving rise to alternate realities within which they interweave. Comparable with the revolution of optical instruments which inspired new artistic genres in northern European Baroque painting, digital environments and interactive interfaces bring forth a rich and innovative creative landscape. In the leading video game industry, Artificial Intelligence inspires more engaging and embodied interactive fictions. Neuronal interfaces authorizing mind-controlled interactions, reveal ontological proximities between characters and users, predicting the rise of a user-centric emplotment. In cinema and broadcast TV industries, transmedia storytelling harnesses web collective intelligence and real-world resources to produce life-scale fictions.

By exploring some recent R&D breakthroughs, I will show that media symbiosis across all platforms transforms fictional worlds into interactive ecosystems.

In a decade, video game became the most innovative and lucrative industry of the Entertainment global market. Exhibiting a worldwide growth no other sector has ever experienced, the gaming industry expects a Compound Annual Growth Rate of 6.5%, reaching US\$82 billion dollars in 2017. Interestingly, market segment analysis shows the importance of avatar-based environments and of role-playing games in this spectacular rise. Within these fully responsive environments, gamer's life is regulated by adoption of what I address as «situated identities», mixing personal and fictional traits and relocation of self into alternate corporealities.



© Quantic Dream, Beyond Two Souls, 2013.

In one night, I can alternatively jump in the hyperrealistic skin of Joel in The Last of Us (2013) customize the face and biography of commandant Shepard in Mass Effect (2007-2017) or slide in the anonymous wanderer of the Journey (2012). Undeniably, our ability to expand our corporeal schema in avatars is as limitless as the one of game designers to increase our sense of presence in virtual realities. This symbolic transmigration into avatars is mirrored in a subtle way within the game Beyond: Two Souls (2013) produced by the French studio QuanticDream. In the plot, the main character Jodie Holmes can externalize from her mind a ghostly entity, and use it to relocate her consciousness into distant places. Endowed with kinesthetic powers, the entity can possess other characters in game, or channel visions for Jodie herself. Using a process of *mise-en-abyme*, the gameplay also allows users to alternatively switch between Jodie's viewpoint and the one of the entity; reduplicating in the game the reality experienced by the gamer in real life.

As a researcher and as a gamer, I have analyzed the semiotical ecosystem of virtual realms. I have been especially interested in virtual corporealities, cognitive stimulations and fictional identification processes in games and in virtual worlds. Through my observations, I identified an interweave of two major systems of signs. The *simulation of the real*, which reinforces immersion and engagement, and, in Gilles Deleuze's terminology, a set of post-human 'perception-images' (Deleuze, 1983) manifesting the rise of a hybrid subject. I will start by examining the most prominent one, which is also the center of attention of CGI studios : the *simulation of the real*.



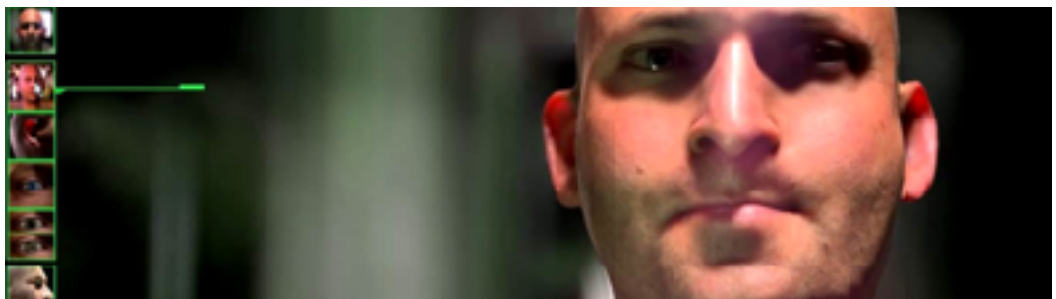
© Thatgamecompany

To turn the avatar into an efficient cognitive vehicle for the user's self, designers appeal to naturalistic artifacts strongly bounding an avatar's body with the user's *sensorium*. In a game like Journey, naturalistic sounds mixed with a very dramatic soundtrack, play a critical role in virtual immersion. No background story, directions, or possibility of verbal communication, are provided to the user who travels the digital world through a reduced proprioceptive apparatus. Indeed, the gamer controls an unidentified and genderless figure, wandering in a vast desert. The sense of immersion in Journey essentially results from subtle inter-references. The avatar's motions enact naturalistic environmental sounds, which stimulate the user's sensorial memory of the real world. From the wind, loudly blowing at each move, to the sand crunching under the feet, the sensorial ghost of the real actively nurtures the virtual body. Such associative tactics were already prominent in the early ages of shared virtual worlds, such as in Second Life (2003) or World of Warcraft (2004). In these open worlds, the accumulation of signs of life and of naturalistic sets enacts a symbolic mediation between the simulated environment and the user's internal order of representation.

In teasing the user's embodied memory of the real, signs of nature prolong and expand the corporeal schema *in virtuo*.

Such dynamic is enhanced by R&D programs focusing on life-like interactive design. The quest for a sense of presence in virtual realities translates as a frenetic quest for hyperrealism.

The hyperrealistic simulation of human features, such as skin, facial expressions and body gestures, has today reached a remarkable level of mastery. Through hybridization of natural and artificial, CGIs are almost overcoming the problematic «Uncanny Valley» into which fall most mimetic 3D characters and humanoids. Derived from the Freudian concept of *uncanniness*, the Uncanny Valley evokes the area of repulsive response induced by an entity which looks *almost* human-like, yet not *fully* human-like. To overcome the issue, creative studios focus on achieving hyperrealistic human face and expressions rendering. In 2013, at the Game Developers Conference, Activision R&D showcased a groundbreaking digitization technique called Faceworks. On a light stage, designers capture facial features, skin surfaces, and lighting on an actor, allowing ulterior animation (such as real-time speech) and integration in virtual environments.



© Activision Human Rendering.

Life-like characters, and the perspective of a superior self-identification of users with their avatars, are highly relevant to hyper-narratives; particularly when telling a story across multiple platforms. A *simulacrum* of hyperrealistic beings holds the promise of a greater sense of connection between the distributed subjects of a virtual community. Additionally, it magnifies life-like communication between users and AI-powered agents, favoring in doing so the perspective of an emergence of complex behaviors in artificial entities.

In increasing the density of signals emitted by digitally embodied humans, digital hyperrealism will generate more relevant loops of interactions, and improve enactive artificial cognition in agents. Within fiction-based environments, physical resemblance with users selves along with hyperrealism of artificial agents will increase ontological proximities between subjects and fictional characters.



© [Avatar](#), James Cameron, 2009. Performance Capture.

For these reasons, characters digital hyperrealism is a common quest for both cinema and video game industries. In *Avatar* (2009), directed by James Cameron, Jake Sully translocates in a physical avatar to explore the planet Pandora. However frequent, the character's embodiment switches are not depicted as disruptive, neither are they perceived as disengaging. The transfer in an alternate body is represented as a smooth relocation of the center of consciousness. The scene is filmed as a rebirth into a bio-technological body, which factually becomes a *second nature* as Jake Sully reincarnates in his avatar at the end of the movie. As witnesses of these body shifts, we equally feel empathetic to Sully-as-a-human-being, and Sully-as-his-avatar. Resemblance of traits and of facial expressions between both entities in fiction harnesses cognitive acceptance. Our brain can process these shifts through accepting the factual transfer of physical and emotional proprieties we are exposed to on screen. Such transfer occurred in New Zealand, on the set of Weta Digital studios where [Avatar's](#) performance-capture was engineered. Performance-capture has profoundly transformed both live-acting and character rendering in movies and video games. As the naturalism of digital creatures is achieved with incorporating expressions and live-action gestures performed by actors, performance-capture operates a literal transcendence of physical world and of sensorial apparatus.

In *Avatar*'s case, the interweave of real world performed actions with virtual bodies was moreover enhanced by using a virtual camera. It allowed James Cameron to work simultaneously in heterogenous realities, directing computer-generated scenes as live-action ones. Thanks to this technique, actors enacted an intermediated corporeality, performing in two realities and two bodies, from the place of a unique acting set.

Enhancing realism in digital creatures initiates a reciprocation between physical and informational realities. I will demonstrate that this reciprocation enacts a *posthuman intercorporeality* rising from our transactions within interactive and immersive realities — especially in interactive fiction.



© *Avalon*, Mamoru Oshii, 2001.

As I have previously stated, the realm of machinic 'perception-images' (Deleuze, 1983) defines the second system of signs of virtual realities. In virtual environments, an embedded post-human perceptual apparatus augments our empirical sphere. In my earlier work, I have commented on the recurrence in movies and in video games of post-human vision and perception-images, combining subjectivity and absolute machinery. I have defined this system of signs as of a *hypervision*. I will explicate this notion through a few examples.

In *Avalon* of Oshii, the movie starts with perception-images emanating from the *sensorium* of an AI. The environment on screen is a pixel grid, exhibiting an electronic viewfinder superimposed with lines of digital encoding. The following sequence exposes the surface of the *simulacrum* as it looks like to the gamers immersed in the eponymous virtual game «Avalon». On screen, the spectator discovers the hybrid reality perceived by Ash, a professional gamer in the movie.

Every time she plugs herself into the VR engine, her perceptions are augmented by in-game interactive interfaces. Ash's digital *hypervision* freezes explosions, follows targets at bullet-time speed, breaks down motions, sees in the dark or through surfaces. *Machinic perception-images*, transferring the viewer into the *sensorium* of a cyborg, portray the power of VR to factually relocate senses and self-consciousness. As it belongs to the augmented human she embodies when gaming, Ash's *hypervision* is an allegory of the post-digital subject that we become in our daily interactions with digital interfaces.

Our perceptual and kinesthetic abilities, enraptured by interactivity and telepresence, have expanded since the 1990s. Relocated in live web-cameras or in viewfinders of FPS games, our vision has been reshaped by a militaristic and performative order of signs. From the place of interactivity, looking is now synonymous with acting upon what is seen. As sight is literally hyperlinked to prehension and telepresence, virtual worlds enact a non-human performative vision.

Beyond the reduplication of militaristic, optical or analytic interfaces within games, *hypervision* also often rises in virtual environments in the form of a disembodied vision. In most online virtual worlds, users can indeed benefit from a transcendent vision, independent from an avatar, and no longer conditioned by the individual monad. Such vision allows users to travel freely through surfaces and textures, reaching a molecular vision state of which subject is the inter-being formed by human consciousness and digital perceptual apparatus.

The video game Beyond Two Souls features an optional «See-Through-Matter-Eye» able to travel the surroundings of the avatar. Such a digital *omnivoyant* eye, transcending both the gamer's and the avatar's bodies, also reflects the ongoing expansion of senses within virtual interactions. Beyond Two Souls takes the idea to an allegorical level by allowing alternative switches of perceptual apparatus: the gamer can decide to alternatively relocate in the *sensorium* of the entity or in Jodie, the main character. Thomas Sheridan and Marie-Laure Ryan underscored that peculiarity by addressing the synchronized relocation of the center of consciousness into distant objects, or into other telepresent agents, as a key-condition of immersion in virtual environments. *Hypervision* reign, expressing an artificial, omnivoyant, and performative sight, fastens the process: consciousness is not only relocated into objects, but into the transparent perceptual apparatus of programs.

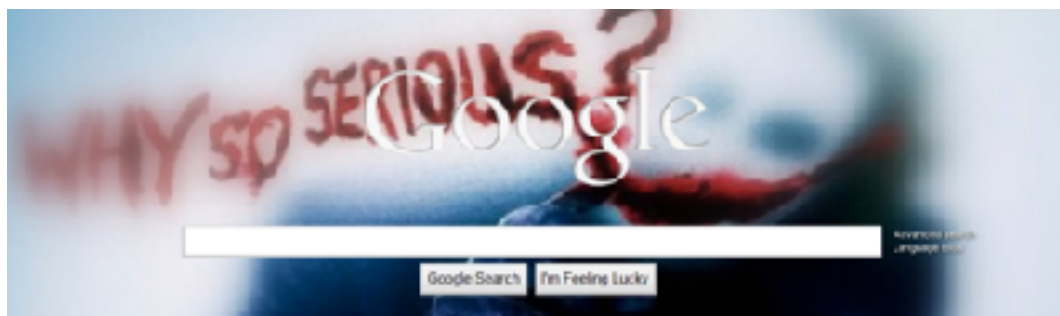
Groundbreaking technologies translate this dynamic to open new horizons to cognition, as well as to creativity. Wireless brain interfaces enabling mind-controlled interactions propel the transcendence of the human mind in virtual realities. They unfold an alternative reality in which performative thinking does no longer belong to Science Fiction.



© Emotiv LifeSciences.

Inspired by the vision of introducing the immediacy of thought to human-machine interactions, Emotiv Lifesciences, a bioinformatics company based in San Francisco, launched the EEG based wireless headset Emotiv Insight. Developed through applications of neuro-technology and brainwave recognition, it tunes into conscious thoughts and discreet emotional states, and allows facial recognition. The interface captures mental states such as attention, focus, engagement, interest, excitement, affinity, relaxation and stress levels. In a virtual environment context, the system can synchronize the avatar's facial expressions with those of the user, and enhance human-like communication between avatars and artificial agents. It empowers users with telekinetic skills that enable them to manipulate virtual objects solely by mind-control. From an interactive storytelling standpoint, detected emotions can alter the virtual environment, induce agency or interactions real-time adjustments, or customized feedback from artificial agents.

In mirroring the complex relationships between emotional states and interpretative consciousness, these interfaces will dramatically heighten the user's immersion while introducing more intuitive forms of agency. They will reveal ontological fusions between persons and fictional characters, perceptions and actions, representations of fictional worlds and enactments of alternative realities.



© Why So Serious Campaign.

Creating alternative realities by turning fictional worlds into life-scale ecosystems is actually of interest for the entertainment Industry. Combining the codes of cinema, television writing, fan culture, video game, and online communities, Transmedia Storytelling emerges as a paradigm of the cybercultural Revolution.

In the first decade of this century, media convergence has led to a profound liberation of forces subsumed by platforms and user-generated content. The nascent *transmediascape* that unfolds before our eyes harnesses web collective intelligence and real-world resources to produce massive audience participation. Distributing the puzzle pieces of a story across platforms, transmedia storytelling is a decentralized and ever evolving narrative, originating from a community of authors comprising of their own audience. Unfolding as a 360° experience, the storyworld engages a massive audience through a web of interlinked medias, and cross-referenced real-world events. This may translate as TV shows spreading into websites, casual games, events in the real world, User Generated Content (UGC), and all participatory experiences. In this creative and symbiotic *spectrum*, «Alternate Reality Game» (ARG) stands as a major genre of transmedia storytelling.

In 2007, 42 Entertainment launched a viral campaign preceding the Premiere of the motion-picture The Dark Knight (2008). An ARG, the *Why So Serious?* campaign was characterized by the LA Times as «one of the most interactive movie-marketing campaigns ever hatched by Hollywood» (LA Times, 2008). Highly pervasive, it involved an audience of 10M participants, and 300M internet users in 75 countries. The official website gave birth to thousands of alternative web pages and blogs, deploying a symbiotic narrative ecosystem nurtured daily by UGC.

Engagement with the audience was sustained by multiple entry points, such as emails, text messaging, manufactured objects, casual games, newspapers, real life meetings, or fake political elections. During the campaign, online users were the focus of a story built upon the creativity of the fan community.

In 2012, HBO invited fans of the novel 'A Game of Thrones' (Martin, George R. R., 1996) to immerse themselves in the screen adaptation's universe. HBO entrusted Campfire, a creative studio known for having produced The Blair Witch Project (1999). Campfire sent handcrafted boxes to bloggers in the capacity of unfolding and spreading out the enigma over the web. In boxes, bloggers discovered bottles of perfumes, each of them evoking a specific location of the fictional world. They were accompanied with symbols, maps, and a mysterious parchment which could only be deciphered through an epic online race. As the storyworld unfolded, Campfire created a multidimensional and organic immersion in the world of 'Game of Thrones', involving for instance a real world gastronomic food tasting event, offering meals from the fictional region of the 'Seven Kingdoms'. By materializing organically the world of 'Games of Thrones', the transmedia strategy permeated real and fictional worlds, creating a multi-sensorial storytelling able to engage eight million viewers during the Premiere broadcasting.



© Games of Thrones

Narrative no longer belongs to an isolated author but to a collective intelligence involved in a life-scale emplotment. The ABC show LOST (2004-2010) was deliberately scripted in a cryptic manner, inspiring viewers to explore the web where they would find themselves trapped into the interactive ARG The Lost Experience (2006), and in an encyclopedic expanse of information assembled by participants.

In such cases, online communities take narrative art to the level of a collective journey, where fiction conquers the factual, and virtuality interweaves with the actual. In that logic, some transmedia projects have been designed as *native transmedia storyworlds*. In a dynamic comparable to that of video game design, transmedia architects create ecosystems of media in which each element, each pivot of the transmediated story, becomes a fully-fledged narrative agent.

ARGs like The Lost Experience and The Hunger Games (2011) reflects that reality. Both campaigns displayed real world advertising billboards of fake companies belonging to their respective diegetic universes. These deceptive ads enacted fiction within the physical space and played the role of narrative agents servicing the fictional series. Interestingly, in increasing doubts between what's real and what's not, through the use of realistic artifacts and media, Transmedia architects of the ARG The Lost Experience displaced onto real citizens emotions felt by the unfortunate characters of the ABC series, themselves confused with the deceiving appearances of the island they inhabit.

In the context of ARGs narrativity should be designated as an *ontological narrativity*, inseparable from the personal history and inputs of online participants. Indeed, users project over the fictional landscape the history of their own actions and perceptions, intimately merging the inceptive narrativity of their own life with that of the represented events. UGC creates real-time collaborative and evolving emplotments. The transmedia storyteller's vision appears thus deeply intertwined with that of participants. As underscored by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, participants «are elevated above their empirical role and become the constituent figures of the plot; they are turned into metaphors, they are configured commensurate with the configuration of the story to which they contribute» [Ricoeur, 1983].

In 2004, I referred to this ecologically situated narrativity as *meso-narrativity*. I first formulated the concept of *meso-narrative* to designate immersive and interactive digital environments. Rising from the core of events and the relational sphere of digital interfaces and media, the *meso-narrative* is inseparable from its experiential environment and deploys itself as an environment, commensurate with the complexity of the interaction. *Meso-narrative* occurs within an interactive and immersive intermediate reality, where real and virtual agents –located in situated identities–, share performative functions and enact an emplotment that will exhibit

the evolutionary dynamic of a world. Meso-narrativity also describes the complex relationship between avatars and characters, whose collaboration is responsible for, or affects, the ontogeny of a responsive fictional world. A decade later, within *transmediascapes*, this concept expands through new narrative genres and appears to be reinforced by the idea of *user-centric emplotment*.



© Lexis Numerique 2012.

French pioneer of the transmedia stage and famous creator of the pervasive game *In Memoriam* (2003), Eric Viennot uses the expression of *total fiction* to qualify these new meso-narratives. In a subtle interweave of facts and fiction, *Alt-Minds* (2012), Viennot's recent project, is another ARG leading online participants to chase a group of missing scientists. Funded by the Alvinso Foundation, researchers disappeared during the summer 2012 in under mysterious circumstances. As the police investigation failed in resolving the case, Alvinso Foundation deployed a team of investigators across Europe and turned to web communities for help. Participants were provided with tools to help find the researchers, and eventually become the heroes of a viral rescue mission.

Defined by its creator as a *total fiction*, *Alt-Minds* interweaves facts and fiction in subtle ways. The game immerses users in an investigation across Europe, unveiling unexplored places. As in *In Memoriam*, characters are pervasive, sending text messages, or writing private emails to participants who can meet up with protagonists and influence their actions. Users locations are taken into account by the plot, relocating essential clues in participants' home cities.

The intoxicating power of transmedia storytelling is expressed in the complex hybridization of signs of the real with those borrowed to the cinema's semiotic universe (film teasers, narrative sound design, creative editing, themes cherished by cinema Noir, or horror movies). While signs of the real create wonderment, signs of fiction wrapped in the language of cinema lead to the user's subconscious desire to be part of an alternative reality. Such dialectic of antagonist forces is frequently met in transmedia aesthetics. Alt-Minds creates strong impressions of the real in viewers' minds. Videos and teasers look like stolen amateur images, fake surveillance footages, or journalistic documentary rushes. Undeniably, transmedia projects reinforce what I would call an *effect of real*, which becomes in the participant's psyche an *effect of presence in the storyworld*.

Through its compelling abilities, transmedia storytelling also stands as a powerful empathy-building experience. The symposium Games for Change, held in NYC in June 2012, awarded the transmedia project Inside The Haiti Earthquake (2010). Throughout a combination of rich media immersion and video game strategy, users alternatively had to step in the shoes of a savior or a survivor of the Haiti disaster. America 2049 (2011), another ARG created by the humanitarian organization Breakthrough, immersed participants in an unstable future where a dictatorship could rise or fall depending on their interactions with fictional characters.

In creating innovative ways to engage with content, Transmedia storytelling opens the way to empathetic, creative, and collaborative, forms of engagement that may very well improve our critical thinking skills when facing the deceiving appearances of our post-digital world.

Transmedia storytelling announces a media symbiosis that will transform fictional worlds into evolving, interactive and possibly autonomous ecosystems. All productions and breakthroughs observable in the creative industry seem to lead us towards user-centric emplotments and increasingly immersive storyworlds.

Computational interactive storytelling will immerse human subjects into stories unfolding in real-time, and within which artificial agents will play a defining role. Our bodies and our identities, enhanced with social interconnectedness, nanotechnologies, cognitive and intelligent interfaces, will live on the verge of multiple dimensions, real and virtual, factual and fictional, and develop symbiotic interactions with digital entities in hybrid realities. Individual stories will interweave with fictional worlds in unparalleled ways, profoundly redefining our embodied experience and our systems of representation.»

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