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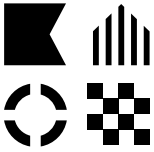
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## Gosma: a project with a transmedia approach

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### Abstract

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The success of a cartoon series is often connected to their ability of reinventing what is expected of animation as a medium. Over the last eight years there have been a number of cartoon series that have in common both a widely spread fanbase and their deployment to other media such as video games, comics and books. In order to expand the universe and often integrate the audience's storytelling experience, the transmedia presents a variety of solutions concerning the ways visual and narrative worlds are built, while being consistent with the main series concept. The integration can be accomplished in either using the audiences expectations and concerns or creating an environment in which the audience's choices decides their experience.

"Gosma!" is a transmedia project being developed at the Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave which explores the transcoding of an animated short by the project team members into a compilation of comics exploring each artist's vision of the same universe and its characters.

By researching ways in which a narrative could be created we held a participatory research activity with children in order to analyse how they would contribute to the narratives by putting themselves into the roles of the characters of a fictional universe.

This article analyses the ways in which the development of this project could address the features of the evolved media through examining the results of this research activity and the development of recent cartoon series and what this might reveal about the creation of a transmedia relationship that expands the universe of the animation to comics.

### 1. Introduction

This article analyzes the transmedia features of contemporary cartoon series, with an huge impact on its success which have originated extensive fandoms. The motivation for this analysis is understand clearly the characteristics of the transmedia relation between animated and comic media that will be explored in a project, "Gosma" – a transmedia project that is being developed at the Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave by a group of 5 master students – as well as to know how the target group can influence its narrative and visual development.

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## 1.2. Transmedia narrative value in today's entertainment

As Henry Jenkins theorizes in his book “Convergence Culture” (2006) the concept of transmedia narratives is about creating a piece of entertainment that is explored across a multiplicity of media so as to expand their concept, acting as a gateway to a new audience and sustain the fan’s hunger for more content. Jenkins also states in his book that, “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.”[1].

Thus, using each media while taking advantage in what they do best has been one of the most successful ways to motivate niche audiences of a medium into a series. Since any product is a point of entry into the narrative, many creators and storytellers have developed a “more collaborative model of authorship” as analyzed by Jenkins [1]. Following this idea the creators of cartoon series assumed a co-creation relationship, allowing authors and artists the freedom to apply their different narrative visions so as to create new experiences in which the franchise can expand, refresh and reinvent itself.

Jenkins also states that, “Popular artists - working in the cracks of media industry- have realized that they can surf this new economic imperative to produce more ambitious and challenging works.”[1].

## 1.3. How can fans expectations influence the development of a cartoon series and their transcoding into comics

In the last years multiple artists that worked on “Adventure time” - one of the most successful long run cartoon series - have been able to use their experience to create new pieces of entertainment aiming to do something new for cartoon animation and its transmedia possibilities.

Natasha Allegri, a storyboard reviewer on “Adventure Time” and a recognized artist on the internet (mostly on Tumblr and Twitter) created an alternative universe of the franchise by inverting every character’s gender (one of the trends in fandoms<sup>4</sup>) that was later portrayed in the show as one of the character’s - Ice King - *fanfictions*. The alternate universe of “Adventure time - with Fionna and Cake” was first introduced by her, when she posted a personal illustration of the characters Fionna and Cake on her art blog, which resulted in an instant praise by the fans stimulating a lot of outputs like *fan fiction* and *cosplay* <sup>6</sup>. The creator of the show, Pendleton Ward later suggested she developed a graphic novel and an episode to explore the concept, which caught a lot of attention from the fandom.

Since the graphic novel was going to be in a printed medium, Natasha Allegri had the opportunity to explore her personal style recurring to textured shadings, patterns and shoujo manga like iconography, with images and narrative related with magical girl theme. This acted at the

4 Fandom, fan community [18]

5 Fanfiction, Fiction written by a fan of, and featuring characters from a TV series, movie, cartoon, etc. [12]

6 Cosplay, practice of dressing up as a character from a TV series, movie, cartoon, etc.[13]

same time with Pendleton Ward's styling of the show's weapons and its narrative that were directly inspired by "Dungeons and dragons" Role Playing Games (RPG) and videogames.

Nowadays, themes that are trendy in the internet fan community are being developed by show creators in order to explore concepts the fans enjoy, being an inspiration to the creators themselves, such as magical girls and games. These themes not only originated in shows like "Adventure Time" and "Steven Universe", created by Rebecca Sugar, but also inspired themed episodes on other cartoon series and comics that used their iconography.

As said by Will Eisner in "Theory of Comics and Sequential Art", "Comprehension of an image requires commonality of experience. This demands of the sequential artist an understanding of the reader's life experience if his message is to be understood. An interaction has to develop because the artist is evoking images stored in the minds of both parties. (...) The style and the appropriateness of the technique become part of the image and what it is trying to say." [8]

Being influenced by trendy themes and fans appetite for something new, a lot of today's most successful cartoon series use iconography that wasn't common in earlier works. Today's audience is much more familiar with Japanese animation and manga, video games and tv series stereotypes, which are some of the most used references for comedic value and visual representation in today's cartoon series. As seen in Tumblr, the social network that is home for many fandoms, the fans tend to discuss the references used for these shows and special episodes, even reviewing them on Youtube. For instance, "channelfrederator" at Youtube, in the video "MORE Steven Universe References You Missed!!" [9] revises some animation sequences and designs that are direct references to the famous cult anime.

Much like the audiences expectative, cartoon animation and comics have been changing and reinventing themselves over the years, by adapting or creating new ways in which stories are being told and redefining what is expected from cartoon animation. According to Charles Salomon, this modernization capacity is connected to the fact that animation is not only an art form but an industry. [14] Rebecca Sugar, formerly known as writer and storyboard artist in "Adventure Time", sees cartoons as a medium that should explore depth and meaning in their narratives as well as an empathetic character representation. Considering these important characteristics for the show to have impact, she says in the book "Art of OOO", "People don't expect depth from cartoons,

**Fig. 1.** "Adventure Time with Finn and Jake" comic chapter cover and "Adventure Time with Fionna and Cake" comic page published by Kaboom! Comics, 2012 and 2013



toons as a medium that should explore depth and meaning in their narratives as well as an empathetic character representation. Considering these important characteristics for the show to have impact, she says in the book "Art of OOO", "People don't expect depth from cartoons,

which is a shame but also an advantage, because if you do put it there it will catch people by surprise and create this awesome friction of the message against the medium” [2].

The cartoon series “Steven Universe” created by Rebecca Sugar focuses on the character representation, with special care in expanding the boundaries of the character stereotyping, for example, showing a male lead character that isn’t a born fighter and believes that conflict resolution should rely on empathy and dialogue.

Rebecca Sugar talks about fans experiencing extreme feelings through the show’s complex emotional arc, and then allowing them to feel calm and reflect on what the characters had learned from that experience during the show’s most introspective episodes.

In an interview Rebecca Sugar affirms, “I wanted to respond to it through the show, and I wanted to do that by giving people a tool to process and calm extreme feelings.” [6]

While developing the show another of her major concerns was also promoting self-acceptance and acceptance of the others by depicting honest characters and relationships that fans can relate with. As she mentioned in *The Verge* [6] online magazine, the show features a different take on what families, heroes, villains and couples look like while exploring the concepts related with self-discovery, love and intimacy, but also hate, fear and abuse.

Another way in which fan activity can influence the process cartoon series and their transmedia products is through a participatory authorship. This concept was proposed by Rachel Meyers in her thesis exposing the evolution of fan interactions with authors/creators, as the internet granted a new communicative power allowing faster discussion and ideas sharing between fandom members thus creating the means in which fan works can be created individually and collectively by the fandom in new unexpected ways.

As Rachel Meyers argues, “Through these amateur (non-profit) creative works, audience members are asserting their right to expand, adapt, and control the meaning of a text. This new form of authorship, which I call participatory authorship, is defined as the active participation of audience members in the creation, expansion and adaptation of another’s creative work.” [17]

The fandoms participative nature differs from that of the casual fans even though they are both part of the audience. By committing their time to contribute with new content, meaning or adaptations for the object of their fandom they become participant authors of said animated series, movie, book, comics etc.

This concept also refers to fanbase contributions to the series that transpire into the official narrative, as previously discussed in the relationship Rebecca Sugar maintains with “Steven Universe” fans.

Another example of fanbase contributions is visible on the ongoing series “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic”. Having reached an unexpected fan of young adults, particularly that of male fans who call themselves Bronies, the internet fandom for this cartoon series also managed to introduce their creations in the official cartoon and comics narratives. One of the contributions is that of Derpy, a background character that appeared in the first episode of the series and triggered

a lot of discussion online. She was initially named as Ditzzy Doo and conceived as a clumsy character by Lauren Faust, the show creator and later renamed by the Bronies as Derpy. Because she gained so much attention online, the producers of the show decided she would appear in the background of every episode as an inside joke between them and the Bronies, until she finally had a speaking part. Another background character loved by the Bronies is a pony with an hourglass drawn on his flank, later named Dr. Whooves by them as a reference to the Dr. Who series. These characters became recurrent throughout the animated show and comic series and are a demonstration of the fandom's participatory authorship in the development of these series.

As a conclusion from the analysis of the relationship between fans and cartoon series, and the way their necessities and concerns influence one another, there are three characteristics that stand out:

- The challenge to explore deep themes in a consequent and emotional way that strayed far from earlier gag driven cartoon series, embracing the fans needs for more engrossing, thought provocative entertainment;
- The reinventing of animation and its transcoding into other media in ways that explore innovative storytelling;
- The active influence of the audience and the fandom also known as participatory authorship [17].

#### **1.4. What changes during transcodification between media?**

The following analysis of these series characteristics and how they vary from cartoon series to comic series, proposes ways in which their transcoding processes can dynamize the way stories are being told. Therefore, the main concern for all the following use of transmedia narratives is to create new pathways to explore the characters and their world using the different media characteristics.

Rebecca Sugar's team tends to use music in the animated show as a tool to convey emotions, much like the concept of "chromatic motifs" described by Sébastien Denis[15]. The characters often express a very natural relationship with music; in addition, the lyrics are capable of demonstrating their emotions in a way that is well perceived by fans and also works as a tool to represent characters communicating and empathizing with each other. Storyboards for these moments often show the characters singing and what they're imagining, representing actions or feelings they're trying to cope with.

Comparatively, in the comics, the artist must rely on panelling to convey the emotion they want to express. As Will Eisner said, "The viewer of a film is prevented from seeing the next frame before the creator permits it." [8]. Usually in comics the whole page or a two-page spread is used to express the nature of a scene. The artists that are co-working in a team, use every visible space to draw the most dynamic scenes often ignoring frame limits, as opposed to more static and spaced frames for the more emotional moments, encouraging audiences to reflect on the character's feeling.



Therefore, we can conclude that sound and storyboard are one of the animation medium characteristics that have to be translated into comics. The rhythm of a scene is connected to the audience's/viewer's perception of time and mood, as Will Eisner analyses in his book "Theory of comics and Sequential Art"[8].

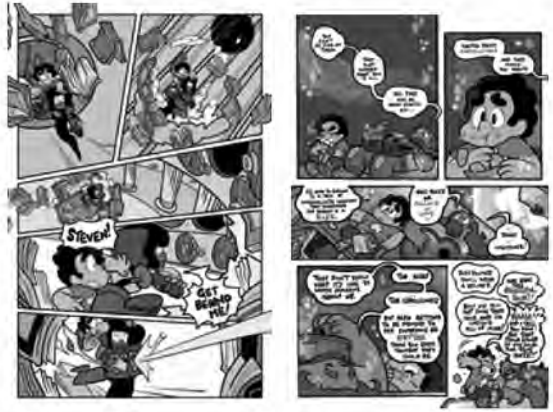
In "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic" animation, character driven storylines are being explored in different ways. Reformulated by Lauren Faust, the show's main concern is to create a diverse cast of characters, complete with skills, quirks and flaws, as opposed to the earlier "My Little Pony" show. The adventure driven narrative has been extended and diversified as well, and draws influence from classic mythology, creating its own universe and legends as said by creator Lauren Faust in the "Art of Equestria" book[10].

The show revolves around exploration either of the characters or the world they live in.

As stated by Scott McCloud: "Creating a human being in the mind of the reader is easy. Just a few lines is all it takes and your readers will do the rest. But if you want them to see a specific person, with a specific appearance and specific hopes and dreams, that'll take a few extra steps." [16] therefore, a special attention was given to these characters and their multidimensional personality and drive. For example, when introducing a villain each new season, presenting their origins and drives helps the audience to understand them and how they affect the other characters. The comic expands this concept by also focusing on the villain's point of view, and exploring new locations and legends.

One of the main differences between the comic series and the animation is the medium potential for detailed illustrations providing a darker mood on some of the villains' stories, and their domains. The way violence is depicted also differs between media; the show relies largely on magic as a weapon while the comics display action packed fight scenes where the characters use mostly their physical abilities. The comic books also reference some characters from other fictional universes, like Pennywise from the horror cult "It" and Optimus Prime from "Transformers" that are used almost entirely for comedic value.

This transcodification of the animated series into comics focuses on extending the cartoon to an older audience, mostly that of the fandom, and acts as a way to bring their collectively creative ideas into the series. As mentioned before, regarding the concept of participatory authorship Meyers analyses, "Wherever possible, the MLP comics utilize fan-created concepts and characters, mixing these with the "official" canon of the show and then receiving Hasbro's stamp of approval on these fan ideas and characters. (...) In a way, these licensed products are



**Fig. 2.** Fight scene paneling and emotional scene paneling; "Steven Universe" issues six and two, published by Kaboom!Comics, 2014



### 2.3. Research activity with children

Our main concern was to communicate concepts such as teamwork, interpersonal relationships and dealing with contrasting opinions. In order to do so, it was important that the audience felt empathy towards the characters. As we have seen previously, in the case of Rebecca Sugar's series "Steven Universe", one of the ways to accomplish that was to deconstruct stereotypes, developing characters with whom the audience could relate to.

Since the target audience for this project are children, it was important to understand how they relate to the characters, story and themes we had set out to explore; therefore the team decided to host a research participatory activity with the target group.

In order to understand how they connect to these concepts we organized activities that placed the children in a context where they have to deal with each other's opinions and work together in order to succeed as well as concept art exercises where they design their take on the characters and brainstorm environment ideas.

The concept of participatory authorship<sup>[17]</sup> introduced above related to the MLP series defines the active contribution of audience members in the construction and expansion of a narrative work and is a way to define how these activities helped to shape our project. In the case of the "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic" the target audience are children and prepubescent girls, but it was the unexpected fandom of Bronies that actively contributed to the show through the concept of participatory authorship. This concept can also be applied when a player creates his own narrative experience through the rules and means defined by the game designer, thus actively participating in the construction of a new narrative within the game world.

We set out to use the same principle with our target group, by providing means in which they could contribute with their creative input and learn more about animation, teamwork and character stereotypes through their experience.

This activity's process is part of a Master's Degree theoretical work done by team member Sara Bairinhas, who documented and analysed the children's reactions and contribution to this project, as well as how they benefited from the experience.

The main objective of this research activity was to understand how children create their own stories and narratives based on given characters and location for the adventure. To do so we introduced some animation principles, held a concept art exercise and prepared a board game in which they would play as one of the characters from the story and decide how to progress in the game to reach the goal.

To better include them in the story's universe and to analyse how they visualized the characters, we first held an activity in which the children drew their own take on the characters based only on given personality traits. Another team member, Sara Covelo, proposed to look into the stereotyping of characters and the representation of an androgynous character, she will later analyse this results comparing them to the character designs we've created.

The obtained results of this activity that better resonate to the theme of this article, are those that are related to the multiplicity of narratives the children created from the given elements of characters and space.

Each group of children, had a different narrative experience through the board game, which also varied each time that group played the game, even though the main goal was always for the characters to leave the forest together.

The first narrative experience included an initial enthusiastic and exploratory mood, as the children set out to discover the forest. As the game progressed they discovered dangerous plants or pits that engulfed some of characters, causing the remaining players to act cautiously and ponder their decisions. The board game had hidden drawings symbolizing penalties for the character's actions that the children found both funny and sad, as they lost more players or some of them became either infected by mushrooms in their bodies or were bitten by a plant. The mystery of the game was to find where all the other characters that disappeared went, and how to save them, thus reuniting all the characters. The children's decisions went from ignoring the disappearing characters and continue exploring the forest, because they were confident that in that game world nothing bad would happen, to later on worrying about the characters that disappeared without which they wouldn't be able to finish the game then focused on solving the mystery.

Most of the groups played the game several times, exploring other paths that weren't accessible the first time around, either because they chose to go the other way or because it seemed less appealing or dangerous. Their drives were also different this time around; they felt more confident as they knew the game better. They were exploring but at the same time trying to win the game faster or win over the penalties, planning ahead a way to fight of the obstacles or elude them so to gain access to different places; others were trying to get in as much trouble as they could; and some were even more involved in the team work spirit, helping and protecting each other this time around.

We concluded that each new play originated in a different story with a different mood, where the characters were played differently, some gaining other personality characteristics the children thought better applied to them as character development or acquiring a different drive.

These different narratives are connected to each other in a way that shows progress and continuity or a total break, revealing ways in which they could play out differently.

#### **2.4. Proposing transmedia options to explore in our project**

The research results helped us to define the story for the animated short film mostly based on the children's first experience with the game board, as well as how they played out the characters, and their changing mood across the story they were creating.

The first exploratory mood reaction was consistent to the characters that liked to explore and have fun - Aida, Ferrinhos and Márcia - as a contrast with the older character - Neves - that only cared about his

sibling - Dani. Neves was mostly interpreted as a strong and kind of bossy character challenging the group's decisions to keep them safe.

The crescent worrying of the children as the game progressed defined the way we decided to portray this story. Therefore, we followed Aida, Ferrinhos and Márcia's original wish to explore, while maintaining Neves who decided to be cautious and stay at the entrance of the forest waiting for help. He and his younger sibling later joined the group when they heard the other characters' distress, revealing that he somehow feels responsible for them as well. When Márcia becomes infected by mushrooms on her arm and the leader of the other kids - Aida - disappears the story gradually falls to a darker tone when they see Neves being swallowed by a tree, resulting in a distressing moment where the remaining characters first talk about being afraid. This distressing moment was inspired by the reactions of the children during the research activity, as they started worrying about how to find the missing characters.

At the end they find their friends and leave the forest, uncovering its secret pathways as a group like they did in the board game.

The multiple narratives resulting from the participatory authorship activity with the children inspired the group to explore different moods for the comics, creating a different adventure and exploring the characters through

it. Reflecting on the relation between these narratives, they could be continuous, simultaneous, precede or follow the animated short narrative.

The project team decided on making the comics a diverse experience, through exploring different timelines and characters, as often applied in the series we analysed earlier; the five students will envision their comics in distinct ways to contribute with a different narrative and visual approach to the characters point of view.

These diverse adaptations of the children's first experience while playing the board game reflected their need to reinvent the narrative each time to expand the story or to explore paths that were inaccessible the first time around.

One of the narratives was influenced by the videogame trend exemplified earlier in the article, and revises the characters as being part of an action RPG, exploring a new character design that resembles the included in game fantasy tropes, while keeping them recognizable. Based on the adaptation concept resultant from the various playthroughs of the participant children we envisioned an adventure with the same characters and their personality conditioned by a different story world.

The story will occur in a game fantasy universe until the last panels, where we reveal the main character (Dani) was being played by its real-world self, and that its adventure happened inside a game. As the narrative progresses we see it interact with other characters, intro-

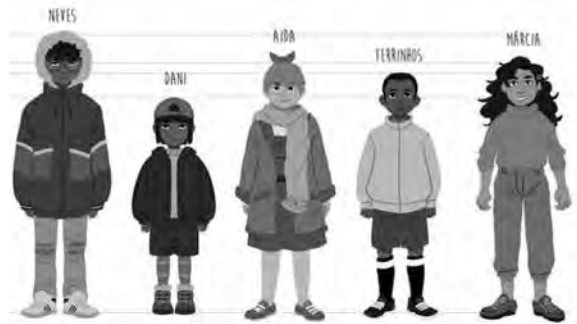


Fig. 4. Characters lineup by team members, 2018

duced by the animated short film, in their game avatar form, and their interactions are consistent to the fantasy they're in as to be uncertain for reader if the characters know they are interacting with their friends or if they're just roleplaying.

The narrative follows the stages of a game quest, as Dani sets on a journey to save their friend Ferrinhos who just got knocked out in battle by Neves, a powerful sorcerer. Dani later finds a potion shop owned by Márcia and asks for help. She refuses to give them a potion without payment, but their friend Aida (who is a stronger player) decides to help Dani, seeking to win against her rival Neves. They go on a journey to sorcerer Neves' domain where the battle occurs.



**Fig. 5.** Paneling draft and characters lineup by Sara Covelo, 2018

As to maintain a videogame visual language we decided to adapt some icons like HP and XP bars, shopping menus and virtual money, as an influence from the “Adventure Time” series where the virtual worlds and their components are explored and adapted to the media the narrative unfolds.

Each character is referred to by their player nickname, maintaining an anonymous identity of each character and to act as a comedic value as it portrays the character's personalities, much like Internet nicknames and personas.

Another narrative the team worked on follows the character Aida and her dog as she returns home from the supermarket at night. Later she meets her friend Márcia who tells her a scary story and jokingly takes a picture of her, revealing a shadow petting her dog.

This comic aims to achieve a horror movie mood, hinted by its cover, colour palette and lighting.

These are two of five narratives meant to have a different mood and visual approach to the comics' medium. Related with the narrative research activity held in schools with a two-media relationship implied we viewed this narrative experiences as timelines, as the children's drives changed through every new game, also the audience/readers expect something new.

We divided the possible timelines revolving around the animated short: the before, the during and after, assigning one of those “when” to each artist. We agreed that Aida's adventure could happen in an ambiguo-

ous timeline as it's based in the relationship with one of her best friends, whose relationship didn't change much during the animation story. On the other hand, Dani's gaming adventure was only possible after he met the other characters while being lost in the fantastical forest.

The team believe that distributing the narratives through timelines will influence how the characters' act in every comic, based on their relationships and their experiences.

Much like "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic" comics we want to explore points of view of characters that have less screen time in the animation. The school bus driver was meant to be a funny character that drove the kids home and eventually lost the school bus as it drove into the fantastical forest. We planned a narrative for the comic parallel to that of the animation short, featuring the school bus driver's adventure in the fantastical forest while he's looking for the kids. This take on the story places an adult in the same place as the kids' story unfolds and explores how he deals with that same environment.

## Conclusions

As featured in our study of animation series, the transcoding of a narrative universe into another medium acts as a gateway to new audiences/readers and their ideas, making it a goal to have each medium stand on its own while still complementing each other. Therefore, while creating these narratives our main concern was to bring more detail to the fictional universe, developing the characters and their relationships, either by avoiding stereotyped characterization, or by testing its limits, while creating an empathic connection between the characters and the audience in order to convey emotions they didn't expect the medium could make them feel. The concept of participatory authorship also shaped the way in which these narratives were created through the participation of a children's audience and their own narrative experiences as characters within the story world and their own vision of how the characters should act and look like.

While the proposed animated short explores teamwork and how the progress of the story influences its mood and the development of the characters, each comic explores different story moods, often opposite to the characters first impression in the animation. Concerning the Aida character, she is introduced in the animation as an impulsive and courageous leader who enjoys exploring, while the comic places her in a scary movie like situation in which she is afraid. The artist's vision for the comic can also introduce narrative and visual processes that help to differentiate these stories from the animation, creating an unique experience for the reader.

The search for different ways in which to tell stories encourages cartoon creators and comic artists to challenge themselves and think outside of the conventional narratives, creating a more interactive relationship with the readers and the animation's audience.

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