Skimmers, dippers, and divers: Campfire's Steve Coulson on transmedia marketing and audience participation

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Abstract:

In this interview, Campfire's creative director Steve Coulson talks about his work in activating fan communities as part of the publicity campaign for storytelling franchises. His marketing firm specializes in creating immersive experiences that encourage fans to participate in transmedia storyworlds. Focusing the discussion on his experience on the campaign for *Game of Thrones*, Coulson reflects on the changing nature of fandom, the possibilities and limitations of transmedia storytelling, fans' reasons for involving themselves with transmedia marketing campaigns, and the future of storytelling in the age of social media and participatory culture.

Keywords: transmedia, fan culture, franchising, marketing, *Game of Thrones*, participation, quality TV

Immersive narrative worlds that spread out their content across many different media platforms have come to dominate our involvement with storytelling. While digitization and media convergence offers many new possibilities for developing cross-media experiences for multiple audiences, the recent emphasis on 'transmedia' as a buzzword also poses new challenges for writers, producers, directors, and marketers. How does one extend a story-world across multiple media platforms while keeping the story-world accessible to a large audience? Who is in charge of overseeing the thematic and esthetic coherence once a franchise branches out in this way? Is transmedia world-building a form of advertising, or is it an integral part of the practice of world-building? Who is your audience, how do you reach it, and who ends up footing the bill?

As creative director of Campfire, a marketing agency specialized in participatory storytelling, Steve Coulson is one of the most acclaimed and experienced creators of

immersive transmedia storytelling campaigns. Two of Campfire's partners were responsible for the groundbreaking transmedia story-world that helped make *The Blair Witch Project* a popular phenomenon in 1999. Since that time, Coulson has developed influential and innovative transmedia campaigns for Sony Entertainment, HBO, Discovery Channel, Harley-Davidson, and Infiniti. As former filmmakers, the company has developed influential and innovative strategies that facilitate and enhance participatory storytelling, attracting specific audiences to brands and franchises by focusing on the social aspects of world-building. In this interview, Coulson tells us about his experiences working on highly successful transmedia campaigns, like Campfire's celebrated work on *Game of Thrones*, talks about the biggest challenges faced by creative staff in developing participatory story-worlds, and discusses the future of immersive storytelling.

Can you start off by telling us a little about the background of Campfire?

The roots of Campfire lie in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Campfire was created by two of that film's producers. Looking back, it was very unique in the way it engaged fans in the story-world-building very early in the process. In fact, fan communities grew up around *The Blair Witch Project* while it was still in the editing room. They leveraged those fan communities as they built further on the mythology, and also leveraged them from a business point of view: it was the fans that drove that movie into theaters by getting this army to call people up. So that observation of leveraging fan behavior and how it can be leveraged to effect change for a business was something which we then decided we could do for other brands. So the very heart of Campfire is that fan-based experience that they had with *The Blair Witch Project*.

How did you first come to associate yourself with the term 'transmedia'?

My roots are in digital marketing and filmmaking: two different backgrounds that came together. I've always tried to combine clients who pay with storytelling that I love. I only became aware of the term after I'd done things that people were calling 'transmedia.' Even now I only use the word because it's become a kind of shorthand for the kind of work that I've done. Campfire doesn't position itself as a transmedia company in any sense of the word. If you go to our website, you'll see our work is focused on fan culture and creating programs that ignite fan passions. Transmedia is just one of the tools that we use. It's a very effective tool because it's very participatory, and fans love to participate, so they go naturally together.

How would you define the term 'transmedia' yourself?

I've seen raging debates about it, and I'm connected to a lot of people that continue to have those debates about the exact definition. For myself: I don't know how to define

'transmedia,' I just know it when I see it. The two elements of transmedia are obviously different kinds of storytelling on different platforms that are uniquely defined by that platform. But also, to me, a true transmedia story involves the audience as a participatory part of that story: whether they take on the role of a character, or they act more like an editor. I often think of what we create as being more of a story-world, and that the participant is weaving together the narrative as part of the storyteller. So those two things: channels and participation.

Is there a difference between 'world-building' and 'transmedia storytelling'?

There's definitely a relationship between the two, because transmedia is always easier with a deeper story-world. I've talked to academics over the past few years, starting with our *Game of Thrones* work. Many students have written to me over the past months, and one asked why transmedia seemed to work better for television than it did for movies. And I realized that most of the work was indeed being done in television. We tend to attract television clients like HBO and Cinemax. But I think filmmakers have a single story to tell, so they build as much of the story-world as they need: that thin corridor of the story to weave those characters together. Because TV series showrunners envision a multi-season arc: they may not write, they may not direct, they're much more interested in building a robust story-world than they are in telling a story. Filmmakers tend not to build a story-world. When I started to think about that, it made me realize why transmedia techniques are being used so much more for television. There are other reasons as well, such as penetration, devices, and the way you watch television and the way you participate. But I definitely think part of it is the structure of episodic television being much more like world-building from its inception.

Does serialization then play an important role in transmedia world-building?

I don't know if it's as much serialization as it is open-ended storytelling. As much as J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof and all those guys on a show like *Lost* will say they have the ending planned, they don't really know until they get to the end of the first season if there's even going to be another season. So it's very difficult for them to plan through to the end of that. But definitely some of the tricks that they have to pull out is not only having a season-long story arc, but they have to build a story-world robust enough to support multiple seasons, for as long as it needs to go. At the same time, we now see film franchises that are absorbing the effects of elaborate world-building on television. The Marvel movies for instance are definitely planned like a TV series rather than like a movie series. I don't think it's any coincidence that people talk about a new Golden Age of television that's happening at the moment. At the same time, the Marvel franchise has become so big because they are programming that like an extended, huge television show.

You mentioned participation as an important aspect of transmedia storytelling. How important are digital media in audience participation?

At a very simple level, you can say participation is playing a game, or doing something interactive on a screen. But at its most simplistic level, participation may be in what order to consume media, or when to consume them, and how fast to consume them. And that doesn't require interactivity so much as on-demand media. So I can choose when, where, and what comes to me and in which format, and certainly digitization is therefore a big part of the on-demand revolution. But I don't think it's as much about interactivity as it is about the on-demand nature of digital delivery.

What about the role of social media and the sharing of content?

Obviously it's all connected. Transmedia wouldn't exist without social media. But the power of social media lies in the ability to create hoc fan communities. Fan communities have always existed, on the boards of Usenet and all those places where fans congregate. But now you'll find that fan communities don't need to be built around a show. It's almost like social media has built a foundation engine for fan engagement. It's made everybody fans, and that has changed the definition of fandom. The etymology of 'fan' comes from 'fanatic,' but now there's a much lower level of entry for the fan. It's no longer just science-fiction and fantasy geekery; there can be fans of wine, or fans of good food. Everybody who shares their Instagram photos of restaurants are part of a 'foodie' fan community that's grown as it allows them to share that fan moment together. So I think the barrier of entry for being a fan is much lower now.

As a producer of transmedia projects, are there specific challenges that you come across over and over again?

Clearly my speciality is coming at it from a marketing perspective. I work for a marketing company, so we work with brands and marketing departments of entertainment companies. So we always have a very specific objective. It's very different from someone creating a piece of art, or someone who has their own story to tell. As much as I'd like to think of my clients as patrons, I always have a strategic objective, and transmedia for us is a tactic to achieve that objective. So the question of whether or not and how we approach transmedia will come from a strategic basis: where is our audience? How can we engage them? How can we most cost-effectively engage them? I hate to use the word ROI [Return On Investment], which is not necessarily measurable in dollars, but where it would have the most impact for the least outlay. A viral video, for example. We would make a decision about the likelihood of how far it could travel, what would be spent up front, what you could spend on the back end, what you couldn't, and so forth. A lot of the channels that we tend to use are dependent on the return we can get from that channel.

Do entertainment companies still distinguish between fan communities and a mainstream audience in similar terms?

There are two parts to that question: firstly, my perception of television companies is that their focus on fan communities usually comes in the first and second seasons. At that point, either the show has taken off, or it hasn't. If it has taken off, the fan community has become self-sustaining. So most of our work has dealt with the first and second seasons of TV shows, because after that, the mass media kind of takes off. I think one of the main changes over the four years or so is that a lot of people were becoming more aware of what transmedia is. And because of this, it has become harder for us to do, for business reasons. When I look back to the work we did for *True Blood*, and the work that we did for *Game of Thrones*, HBO's marketing department at that point really embraced the idea of working with a story-world across emerging channels. Marketers always embrace channels before storytellers do, because they're looking for the next opportunity to reach larger audiences. So we were allowed pretty much free reign.

Since the creators of Campfire were filmmakers to begin with, we are precious about story-worlds, so nothing that we created for *Game of Thrones* was against canon, and George R.R. Martin loved it because it had an authenticity to it. But by and large the marketing department was left to do to their thing, because the showrunners were making the show. What I've seen over the last four years is as more people talk about transmedia, and more people realize the power of storytelling across media platforms, showrunners, filmmakers, and programming departments have started to say: 'Wait, that's our domain. We shouldn't leave this to a marketing department.' But the end result is that less gets done. Often a lot of the great work in the large companies gets done by the guy in the corner who has a side project nobody pays much attention to, because as soon as people start paying attention to it, bureaucracy gets involved and kind of grinds everything to a halt. So I do think that as Hollywood has become more interested in telling stories across multiple channels, it's actually become harder to do, because now everybody is claiming it as their own domain. I've certainly noticed while working with the showrunners of shows like *Banshee* and *Hunted*, who were very interested in the work we'd done. We'd like to do more of this work, but as the showrunners get more involved, the marketing department that funded those pieces would have less freedom. One client came to us and asked us to work on the show, but wanted us to produce something that wouldn't touch or even use the story-world, because the programming department, the showrunners, feel like that's their domain. So I think it's actually become harder to get the work done as more people have grown interested in it.

Do fan-produced materials play a role in this process as well?

I hear a lot less about that than I used to. Obviously Paramount was really famous for taking down all those *Star Trek* fan sites in the early days. Our clients are much more tolerant and embrace fan participation, because they realize that it's not a challenge but that it's actually helpful. I don't think that's impacting the production of transmedia extensions as much as it is everybody knows they want to do it but nobody's quite sure who pays for it. That's the other thing: the *Game of Thrones* season 1 work that we did was very story-world-based, and fans therefore loved it. It was paid for by the marketing department, not by the programming department, because programming were quite rightly spending all their money on costumes and props and all the things that had to be made for that TV show. I don't think there are any TV production companies at the moment that are carving out a production budget that includes a hefty piece for transmedia elements as part of their programming. I think that will come, but we may be two or three years away from that.

Are there strategies you can easily repeat in terms of activating a fan audience?

I don't think they're repeatable in the sense that everything we do here is kind of bespoke, and is kind of custom. But I can mention the food trucks we did for *Game of Thrones* as an example.[1.] I don't know if it's repeatable to do food trucks, and since then I haven't seen any show-related food trucks. The most amazing thing to me about the *Game of Thrones* food trucks was it was a fairly small fan base. George R.R. Martin's books had sold, but if you'd ask the general person on the street about *Game of Thrones*, nobody would have name recognition. So we put those trucks out on the streets of New York, and I remember vividly that we had announced we'd be in Astor Place earlier in the day. The first night I got there, and I was unsure whether anybody was going to come to these food trucks. So I watched the truck as it came down the street, and as it did, people started running behind me. Then I realized that *everyone* there in Astor Place had been waiting for this food truck, and suddenly there was a 300-person line at the truck within five minutes of it reaching them. I haven't seen that done since.

I think it worked so well because we did a lot of work building up to this thing with the 'Four Senses' campaign that preceded it. We realized that the food trucks were absolutely not about the food, but they were miniature fan conventions. You would walk along that line, and there were fans holding their books like bibles, and they'd never had an opportunity to interact with each other: all the way down the line, they were talking about their favorite characters, their favorite moments.

So in answer to the question: giving fans an opportunity to congregate and share their passion is the thing that always works the best. Not necessarily giving fans individual things to do, but giving them something they can share and talk about. The social aspect is key. In fact, over the last few years, the most successful program that we ran was one for Cinemax, for a show called *Hunted*.[2] In some ways, the campaign reached a wider audience than the show did. It was a piece that was designed to be experienced alone, but it gave you a moment that you'd want to talk about with other people, to see if they experienced the

same thing that you did. And because of that, we made the front page of Reddit three times in eight weeks, because communities wanted to gather around and discuss what happened to them. So it's not so much about the story that you create: if you can create pieces that fans want to engage around, and there's a reason for them to have that connection, those kind of things really always work for us.

The Game of Thrones *food trucks blurred the boundaries between the story-world and our real world, in a way that's similar to Alternate Reality Games. Have you organized any ARGs yourself?*

There were alternate-reality elements in our *Hunted* work. Obviously it really depends on the story-world that you're playing with. We recently rolled out a program for Infiniti that was kind of an alternate-reality moment, because you ended up talking to a character on the telephone while you were watching them. So it blurred the line between what is really happening in real time, and what might be a portal into a story-world. The interesting thing about the food in our 'Five Senses' campaign for *Game of Thrones* was the amount of attention to detail in that program. The fans really responded to that obsessive attention to detail.

Here at Campfire, we segment our audience not by type but by propensity to engage. So we have a pyramid model that consists of Skimmers, Dippers, and Divers, knowing that most people are Skimmers. And then the further you move down, the smaller the audience. ARGs are really something for Divers: a small audience of people that have a propensity to dig deep. We use that model to make sure that the material that we create for the deep Divers has an element of evangelism within it, because Divers can be great evangelists. The Divers bring the Dippers down, the Dippers bring the Skimmers, and it becomes a self-propulsive loop. So with the *Game of Thrones* food trucks, it was very important to us that the food on those plates was the most authentic you could be to this world. So I sat down with chef Tom Colicchio and said: 'We need to use food as storytelling,' which is how chefs see food anyway. When you get a plate of food, you can tell a lot about a culture from it: the technology that's used to cook it, the ingredients, the climate, how processed or how natural it is, carnivore or vegetarian, what the people are like, what level of sophistication they have, whether there are any ritualistic elements to the meal, what kinds of animals they use. You can tell a lot about that culture at that period in history from a plate of food, so we got very technical about the exact ingredients: what would you find in this kind of zone, and how would they be able to prepare them with that kind of technology. And I think that attention to detail appealed especially to the Divers.

Are there other campaigns that you admire as examples of effective transmedia storytelling?

I really liked what they did for *Prometheus* (2012), just because it was a really good example of the storytellers getting involved with the creation of materials in a very seamless way: the

TED-Talk and those other additional elements to the world. Some of the work that 42 Entertainment did a while ago, especially the work for *TRON: Legacy* (201). All of what they do is interesting because it's very fan-centric, whether it's for *The Dark Knight* (2008), or *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012). I thought the *TRON* work was very interesting because it ended with a fan congregation at Comic-Con that really paid off. ARGs, which have made up a large part of the history of transmedia, have a law of diminishing returns: they start in a great place, and then people drop off until it ends with a whimper because there are so few people around, so you miss the big bang at the end. While what a marketer wants is a campaign that grows bigger as time goes on. So you have to design it in a very different kind of way, to make sure that each layer opens it up to a bigger audience. I'm not sure that the *TRON* work did that, but I liked the way that it ended with a fan celebration.

It's difficult for me though to comment on other people's work, not because I don't like it, but because it's easy to get distracted by other people's understanding of what transmedia is. Even when I was working on website design, if you spent too much time looking at other people's work, you would end up being affected by it. So I try not to absorb as much as I probably should, because your work becomes derivative.

Early descriptions of transmedia were about telling one coherent story across numerous media. Your description of the pyramid made up of Dippers, Skimmers, and Divers suggests that different media offer different entry points for different audiences. Franchises like The Walking Dead *and* Game of Thrones *now seem to offer parallel narratives rather than one plot spread across multiple media.*

I personally wouldn't call *The Walking Dead* a transmedia franchise, nor do I consider *Game of Thrones* one at all. The 'Maester's Path' program for *Game of Thrones* was a transmedia program, but that doesn't make *Game of Thrones* a transmedia franchise in any sense of the word. I would call it a multi-platform storytelling franchise. With *The Walking Dead*, all the different media products surround the people with the central brand of the franchise. It's a little different for something like *Star Wars,* where you enter into a debate on whether it was designed to be a transmedia story-world, which also raises questions of authorial intent. But obviously *Star Wars* is fairly unique in how its Expanded Universe was an attempt to maintain to some degree a seamless narrative canon.[3] This is obviously different from *The Walking Dead* or *Game of Thrones*, which both tell multiple parallel stories. So I would definitely say that *Star Wars* is more of a transmedia story that's being told than *The Walking Dead* is. But certainly those franchises are taking advantage of multiple channels.

In the case of Star Wars*, the relationship between fans and the franchise's producers has been fairly contentious over the years. How do you see the relationship between authorship and audience participation?*

We can look at other franchises that have long outgrown their original author, like Star Trek and Gene Roddenberry. We've talked about the Marvel franchise, but it's even more interesting to see what's happing with DC right now, just because your question earlier about fan-created content relates directly to how they are now trying to develop their characters as a more coherent story-world. I would say the entire roster of DC Comics output around Superman is fan-created, because that is a character that's been around long enough not only to be divorced from its original creators, but all of those authors that are directing that franchise are fans: they grew up as boys reading that comic, and have become über-fans who've made this into their career. And a lot of those comic book writers are long-term fans: they are the fan community made good. George R.R. Martin is a fan himself, a big superhero fan who famously attended the first Comic-Con. So while the DC franchise is really failing with its movie plans at the moment, which so far aren't nearly as successful as the Marvel one, it's definitely being run by a fan community. So I don't know to what extent authorship is important in such a context.

I think it's more like there's a covenant between the creators and the audience that a story will ultimately make sense. If I know someone like J.J. Abrams is overseeing this, then there's a covenant between us that it will be resolved with a reasonably satisfying finale. So maybe there's a covenant between Martin and his audience that he will finish this thing in a way that makes sense. I don't envy his position though in relation to the books he hasn't yet written, because there's no way he cannot be affected by the success or the failure of individual performances within the television series. For instance in the role of Tyrion Lannister, Peter Dinklage brings something to that role that fans love, so I think he's duty-bound to keep that character at the center of the books. So I do think it affects where he'll be going. It shows the symbiotic relationship with the fans as well, because this thing is not in the can, he's continuing to write this, and who knows if he's changing the ending as the TV show catches up with him. We'll see who gets there first, right?

All the examples we've talked about are corporate-owned commercial storytelling franchises. Do you see opportunities for transmedia storytelling that are non-commercial?

I think it's very interesting to see some of the things being done in music: I really love the work Björk did with Biophilia, with branded apps and trying to extend her reach beyond just the auditory. I would even classify some of the work that Beyoncé did for her new album as transmedia.[4] That may be stretching it, but I definitely think it takes the same kind of attitude to not only creating a story that can be absorbed in multiple ways—listen, watch, both together—there's an added story value if you do it in a sequence, as you start wondering whether there's also an underlying story or concept here. So now that there are many consumers across multiple channels of stories that there is as much room for original IP [intellectual property] to flourish. But it does come down to a question of commerce: how is revenue derived, and how is it compensated? Clearly there's a very specific commerce equation that's involved with marketing because there is a fiscal set of objectives, there's a

budget in place to achieve a certain objective, which will then play into a revenue goal that will either be about getting advertisers to a show, so therefore pay for productional subscribers through a channel, and thus continue the means of production. So there's definitely a cost-and-payment system. There's a financial return on investment, and it's more difficult to do that with wholly original IP unless you have some model where you subscribe to a story or to a channel.

Do you see transmedia world-building as the future for storytelling?

Participatory storytelling is the way of the future. One of the things that we say here is that storytelling was always participatory: whether you were around a campfire, where there would be forms of interaction, or whether it would be the people shouting at a Shakespeare stage. The invention of mass media created an environment in which people could be told to sit down, shut up and pay attention, which started with cinema, then extended to TV. I think we'll eventually see that as a 20th-century blip in the history of storytelling. Because now we are returning to the form of storytelling that existed for centuries: people reacting, taking the story, changing the story, interacting with the storyteller, and taking the story in other directions. So I think participatory storytelling is the future, but it's also reverting back to the past. This blip of mass media will then have been a moment in time that will disappear. Audience participation will depend upon how fan communities interact with stories. We're seeing new experiments with story-worlds in which there is less of a divide between storyteller and consumer, which is completely driven by digital technology and social media, as a facilitator for people to interact without being in the same room together. One example that's very successful in New York is the project Sleep No More: a retelling of *Macbeth* in a huge warehouse on multiple floors that are all beautifully designed. The audience walks around the building and the characters interact with the audience members in a very participatory, *Eyes Wide Shut* kind of way. And there's something else called *Queen of the Night*, which is a form of dinner theater that's very participatory. We're definitely seeing more participatory theater in New York that's getting a lot of attention. So we seem to be moving back to more participatory storytelling across all platforms.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

[1] An important part of Campfire's transmedia campaign to publicize the first season of HBO's TV series *Game of Thrones* (2011-) was the deployment of food trucks in New York City and Los Angeles in the period leading up to the series premiere. Celebrity chef Tom Colicchio worked closely with Campfire to develop a menu of free food inspired by the franchise's story-world. Other parts of the campaign included weather-themed tablet and smartphone apps, a website that allowed users to explore locations in the series' story-world, and custom 'sandboxes' sent out to press and key online 'influencers.'

[2] To promote Cinemax's global espionage series, Campfire's campaign approached users as if they were being recruited by the show's clandestine security firm Byzantium. An elaborate online test challenged users' emotional responses and subconscious instincts in a way that seemed uncannily specific. Strategically placed posters contributed to the campaign's success as an immersive viral experience.

[3] While debates among fan communities about what is or is not canon in the *Star Wars* story-world have always been heated, the formal status of the Expanded Universe was obviously affected by Disney's May 2014 announcement that the SWEU was no longer considered official canon by the producers.

[4] [4] Beyoncé's eponymous fifth studio album, released without advance notice in December 2013, was described as a 'visual album.' Besides the musical tracks, users who purchased the album online also downloaded short films accompanying each song that illustrated the stories that underlay the tracks' composition.