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SECTION I

INTRODUCTION TO TRANSMEDIA
Anna Heath was the mother of three young children and a brilliant languages professor. She was also a fictional character—part of the game Perplex City, which was a two-year-long treasure hunt developed by UK games company Mind Candy that attracted tens of thousands of players and sold more than a million puzzle cards.

One night in late July 2006, Anna disappeared. Her colleagues desperately tried to put together the pieces of where she had last been seen and by whom. Her husband appealed to the public for something, anything, that would ensure her safe return home.

But it was all for nothing. The search for Anna eventually turned up her body in the catacombs beneath the city. She had been brutally tortured and murdered while investigating a series of thefts from the academy where she was employed.
The audience was devastated by her loss. They reported feeling as if they’d been punched in the gut, that they hadn’t seen it coming, that they were surprised at the depth of grief they felt for an imaginary person.

Heartfelt condolence emails to all the other characters in the game flooded in. Players even cast about for a real-world way to honor Anna’s memory. Together, some audience members folded 333 origami cranes (a number that had special significance in the world of *Perplex City*), and a group of them personally delivered the cranes to Mind Candy’s London office.

Characters die in fiction all the time, of course, and audiences are often devastated by it. But in this case, their grief was made deeper by the feeling that Anna was a friend, not just a character. After all, they’d read her website and seen puzzles she had designed for her children to solve. They’d emailed her, and she had responded to them.

Even worse, in the days leading up to her death, they had helped her to investigate a deadly secret society called the Third Power, and had even urged her to keep up her efforts. And, worst of all, they were the ones who had unwittingly sent her to her death that night.

They weren’t merely sad—they felt personally responsible, because they had been complicit in her death. As Juxta on the online community Unfiction said, “That aching and seemingly bottomless little hole which has appeared, unbidden in the depths of your stomach as you heard this news? That would be guilt.”

Any single-medium work can in theory make an audience laugh or cry. But make an audience feel directly involved in the events in a story? Whether we’re talking about responsibility for sending a woman to her murder, or perhaps instead saving
her life or introducing her to her future partner, you just can’t evoke that feeling with a book or a movie.

This is the power of transmedia.

THE AUDIENCE EXPECTS MORE

If you’re reading this book at all, you probably already know that transmedia is the hot new thing. Hollywood is buzzing about it. Madison Avenue is selling it. Film festivals are celebrating it. Audiences are consuming it, by the tens of millions. It is the realm of deep experiences and completely immersive stories, and it can evoke emotions that simply can’t be replicated in a single novel or film.

Imagine Googling a fictional company from your favorite TV show and finding that it has a website. It turns out the company is hiring right now, so you apply for a job. A few days later, you get an email saying you’ve been hired.

Imagine calling up a security guard at the Statue of Liberty on the phone. You plead with him to rescue a friend of yours, a young boy who has been kidnapped and is being held close by. To your relief, the guard agrees to risk his job and help the boy; a life is saved.

Imagine taking to Twitter on Halloween to spin a story about H. P. Lovecraft’s sanity-eroding Elder Gods returning to devour us all. And it’s not just you—it’s a joyful collaboration, with hundreds or even thousands of individuals fabricating a common fiction together.

All these things have happened in real transmedia projects, and that’s just skimming the surface of what’s possible. Transmedia is more than mere marketing or franchise entertainment. It’s the realm of stories at the edge of where reality ends and fiction begins.

Once upon a time, nonfunctional phone numbers (555-0038) and fictional addresses (123 Main Street, Anytown, USA) were the de facto choice every creator made. Over time, audiences were trained out of their natural inclination to investigate
further. They simply expected that any contact information in a story would be a dead end.

Today, though, that expectation has been overturned. If a character in a TV show hands out a business card, it’s likely that you’ll be treated to a close-up shot, including a working phone number, email address, or URL. Searching the web for fictional companies, places, and even characters is just as likely to turn up a website or social media profile as not. Email addresses mentioned in a show’s dialogue will accept mail from you . . . and sometimes even write back. And when you add up all of these pieces, the whole is very much greater than the sum of its parts.

Creators have discovered that expanding their story universes to include these other components is feeding a core hunger of their truest fans: to have more, richer, deeper stories. Fans who love your creation are going to want to see more of it. They want to be a part of it. Transmedia—telling a story through multiple communication channels at once, particularly channels such as the web and social media—is the way to give them what they want.

**BUSINESSES WANT MORE, TOO**

Corporate heavy hitters like HBO, Disney, Sony Pictures, BBC, Warner Brothers, Ford, Scholastic, Penguin, and others have taken notice, and are spending more and more time and money on creating transmedia experiences. It’s a topic of growing interest for independent artists, filmmakers, marketing execs, and TV and movie studios—and their jobs are increasingly depending on it.

The marketplace is already shifting fast to prepare for the new entertainment ecosystem to come in which transmedia is destined to play a crucial role.

In March 2011, transmedia received an enormous vote of confidence from the business establishment. Fourth Wall Studios, a small Los Angeles start-up specializing in transmedia entertainment, scored an investment round of $15 million, with access to a fund of $200 million more—a sum that would do any dot-com start-up
proud. And that’s just one news item following a long string of good news for transmedia creators.

That same month, no less than a dozen panels at the influential SXSW Interactive conference extolled the virtues of transmedia experiences. Looking back earlier in 2011, the ambitious transmedia film *Pandemic* took the Sundance Film Festival by storm, and tens of millions of people participated in the transmedia marketing campaign for *Tron: Legacy*, helping the film to rake in nearly $400 million worldwide.

Still further back, the film-focused Producers Guild of America introduced a transmedia producer credit in April 2010, legitimizing the title as its own credential. In 2009, the prestigious Grand Prix award at the Cannes Cyber Lions ad festival went to a transmedia narrative, *Why So Serious?*, a marketing campaign for *The Dark Knight*. And the International Emmys have given awards to interactive programs going back as far as 2006.

That’s not even talking about the dozens of innovative and critically acclaimed independent projects.

But these events were a long time in coming. There is nothing sudden or unexpected about the widening interest in transmedia; it’s just that the movement for transmedia storytelling is finally reaching a tipping point after years of buildup. Some creators have been working toward this moment for a decade and more. Now that the moment is here, the payoff is enormous.

There’s money to be made and glory to be reaped. Creators who get into the transmedia game now will have an edge in the future. And if that’s not enough to get your attention, you should know that transmedia opens up mind-blowing creative possibilities for artists, even those with even limited budgets and tools. The world is your oyster.

And yet, despite all this interest—all these awards, press attention, and money—there is very little in the way of practical advice out there. Would-be creators are starving for information that can teach them not merely how to tap into digital
media, but how to build compelling, well-executed transmedia projects that enhance the value and extend the reach of their properties.

This book can't be exhaustive, just as you can't draw a detailed map of undiscovered terrain. But I do have a lot of hard-won experience crafting transmedia stories; I’ve worked on marketing projects, original intellectual property (IP), and serious games. I’ve been commissioned, crowdfunded, and done client work. My projects have won awards ranging from the Vanguard Origins Innovation Award for game design to BIMAs to the Prix Jeunesse Interactivity Prize, and have even been nominated along the way for BAFTA and Games for Change awards.

I’ve picked up a few things along the way. *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling* shares what I’ve learned with you.

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**Q&A: SEAN STEWART AND ELAN LEE**

Sean Stewart and Elan Lee are two of the most innovative and widely known creators in transmedia. They were behind the alternate reality game for *A.I.* and helped to found 42 Entertainment, creating such hits as “I Love Bees” for *Halo 2* and *Year Zero* for Nine Inch Nails. They have since moved on to found Fourth Wall Studios.

**Q:** How did you get into transmedia?

**A:** We started with a project for Steven Spielberg’s movie *A.I.* The idea was to build out the world the movie was set in (Earth 2142), and then tell a story in it, spread out across web pages, emails, phone calls, live events, and even fax transmissions. (Remember fax machines?) I don't think any of us were thinking about the word *transmedia* at the time; we just wanted to bring you the story across every channel of your life.

That project, nicknamed *The Beast*, is now considered the first fully formed “alternate reality game” (ARG). From the day it launched, it was clear we had
stumbled onto something kind of amazing. We’ve been working in the space ever since.

**Q:** Can you tell me a little about your favorite projects?

**A:** We’re game designers and storytellers: our favorite moments are ones where the audience is delighted, astonished, moved, or amazed. In the early ARG work, it was incredible to see the power of a collective audience working together to uncover a story, as they did in *ilovebees*, going out to pay phones all over the world to collect a *War of the Worlds*-style radio drama about an alien invasion.

More recently, we’ve been working on making the tools of transmedia storytelling more accessible to a mainstream audience. In that regard, the fact that *Cathy’s Book* (a transmedia novel) was an international bestseller was really gratifying. We set up our current shop, Fourth Wall Studios, to create these kinds of more accessible experiences. The very first thing we put out the door was called *Eagle Eye: Free Fall*. The day it came out, someone posted, “OMG I showed this to my mother-in-law and she LOVED it!” That was a huge win for us.

**Q:** Where do you see the art and business of storytelling headed over the next few years?

**A:** The Internet is a printing press, a movie camera. Just as those inventions led to the development of the novel and the motion picture, we’re going to see the birth of new kinds of storytelling that are more than just “a book you read on your Kindle” or “a movie you watch on your iPad.”

People will find ways to use the capabilities of the tech (the mic on your cell phone, the gyroscope on your tablet) to make you laugh and cry. And because spending all day on that is more fun than bagging groceries at the Piggly Wiggly, all of us who are interested in new forms of entertainment will be working hard to create the business models that support this next-gen content.
Q: What would you recommend transmedia creators learn about to improve their craft?
A: The audience.

    Seriously, all the tech in the world is a means to an end, and the end is taking your audience somewhere amazing. If you're a writer, pay attention to writing that delights you. If you are a game designer, think about the games that you couldn't stop playing.

    Then try keeping in mind a sort of Copernican revolution: instead of thinking of the entertainment as something that lives in a book (or box or console) that your audience has to come to, think of that audience as the sun: try building entertainment that orbits around them.

Q: How has your design philosophy changed over the last 10 years?
A: Well, we famously built our first project around the premise “This Is Not a Game.” We wanted it to feel real, because we wanted the stakes to matter.

    These days, we are every bit as dedicated to the idea that our stories should matter to people, but blurring the line between reality and fiction feels old. The world has caught up to transmedia. To use an analogy, people at the first motion pictures weren't sure that the train on the screen wasn't going to burst through the theater and run them down. But that moment passed in a heartbeat. Similarly, today's audiences are perfectly able to view everyday reality as something that can be “skinned” with a story as easily as they can change the wallpaper on their desktop.

    Rather than ask them to believe that our content is “real,” we just want to give them easy access to fascinating worlds and compelling characters.

Q: Is there anything you wish you’d learned or tried earlier?
A: From the very beginning, we’ve wanted to create original content, but in the early days, most of the exploration in this space was funded with marketing
Budgets. To be in a place where we spend time every day trying to create the iconic properties of the next generation of entertainment—that's exhilarating.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring transmedia creator who's just starting out?
A: Respect your audience. They deserve your best work.

When you are working, be prepared to iterate. Unless you are currently in the sixth grade, you grew up in a very different world, and your first ideas are going to come from an older paradigm. Be patient, but be relentless; the real treasure, the gold, is stuff you will discover in the process of creation, when you are at your wit's end and your first idea just isn't working.

And, of course, good luck!