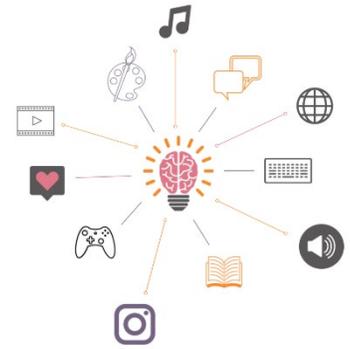# TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING IS THE KEY TO SAVING OUR PLANET

Climate change is a threat so immense that it seems untouchable. To foster a society invested in seeking global solutions, we need to begin by telling more stories.

By Field Peterson | December 2020

What was once a single pillar of smoke has now blocked out the sun, blanketing my life in white ash. My lungs are frail. All along the front range, the mountains have been on fire for well over four months now. Firefighters gave up a long time ago- there was never any hope. I miss when the melting glaciers were my main concern. Lately, I've just been wondering when the next pandemic will hit. -- Voice Notes, September 2021.

Interconnected Media

Transmedia storytelling uses the unique nature of different media platforms to expand upon narrative elements. Each outlet allows for alternative angles or deeper connection with aspects of the story. Blogs, social media posts, video games, movies, and podcasts can each present a unique method to present information. The idea of transmedia storytelling was originally explored by Henry Jenkins, who was interested in what it could offer to audiences and creators alike. The interaction of people and technology is at the heart of effective transmedia storytelling as story layers are expanded upon between media outlets.

I caught up with Colorado State University's Dr. Michael Humphrey to hear his perspectives on transmedia. Dr. Humphrey is a highly respected educator and experienced journalist who focuses on narratives and storytelling, bringing a realistic and philosophical approach to his work. Exactly the kind of intellect we need.

Definitions are a good starting point with transmedia. Humphrey says that the power of transmedia lies in the media types. "Each media type that you use is full and rich within itself, it's not referring to something else for you to have a full experience, but also that it's not just a repetition of something else you've seen in media," he says.

But rules are meant to be bent. Humphrey continues, "Whether it technically meets the standard of Jenkins' concept of transmedia isn't as important as the fact that the sense of a multi-dimensional world through these different media types is affecting the consumer's brain. If that's what's happening, then you've done the most important thing transmedia has to offer." When we take a transmedia approach, we can build story worlds that are broadened with each new media outlet.

Narratives are Key

You already know transmedia. Think *Star Wars*- a galaxy far, far away, yet entirely close to home within movies, books, shows, Legos, Disney World, and much more. If you like this fictional world, you can't help but want to explore more stories from it. As Humphrey says, "Good transmedia makes you travel from one platform to another." Once captured by the narrative, you'll seek more from other platforms.

Since each platform offers something unique, more information will be uncovered through exploration, Humphrey says, "Each media component is being used to tell its own story. Sometimes they overlap, but they don't repeat each other, they complement each other. The mental effect that comes out of that is that a story world starts to emerge."

Now, what if we could create that level of immersion with climate change? It's a vast, looming issue that many people find hard to connect with. We can create a personal association between audiences and climate change by sharing stories and building characters that encapsulate the issues at hand. Humphrey says that characters can drive narratives. "You always need character, but it doesn't always need to be human," he explains. This means that plants, animals, or even entire ecosystems could become central pieces to the stories that we tell. Immersion is the key, and when achieved, it creates effective transmedia systems.

Over 10 years ago, a project called 'Love Letters to the Future' captured the potential of transmedia with climate issues. Anyone could send a letter of support to a fictional girl named Maya from the future whose world was threatened by climate change. Participants could interact with forums, social media pages, and alternative reality games to send a letter, which was then sealed in a time capsule in 2009, to be opened 100 years later. Character, real-world applications, and multi-modal involvement were all used in promoting engagement with the story.

Photographer James Balog believed that the stories surrounding climate change could be found in melting ice. In 2005, he began a project later known as the Extreme Ice Survey that captured images of melting glaciers. A former non-believer in the planet-wide crisis, this project changed Balog's entire perspective. Through printed images, time-lapse videos, public speaking engagements, museum displays, documentaries, and social media campaigns, the Extreme Ice Survey has been able to spread awareness and tell stories by utilizing transmedia, with melting ice as the central theme and character.

Science for Everyone

We can take lessons on audience engagement from entertainment media, where the entire objective is getting, and keeping, attention. We can use these ideas to start presenting science in a way that any person can relate to, not just those who can decipher thirty pages of scientific jargon in a research paper.

"Science only matters when it starts to apply to our life. It could be a very practical thing or a very aspirational thing, or it can be even an imaginative thing that creates a sense of wonder," Humphrey attests, "Whatever it is, we're not going to care about data until we can apply it to our life, and transmedia is a way of saying, 'get in the middle of it and understand it on some visceral level'." Visceral is right. When we start to break down large concepts into manageable pieces in a way that resonates with our interests, we'll be invested.

Telling stories is the key to providing momentum for personal accountability to sustainability issues and promoting investment in the health of our planet. Once we begin to garner interest in these compelling, yet informative story worlds, we'll see new ideas grow.

Humphrey says that we should also allow for new ideas to stem from our original narrative. "If you can't let go of the frame and let some kind of possibility grow out of it, then all you're asking your audience to do is respond," he says. We need to let those possibilities grow and allow for innovative ideas to flourish to have continual engagement, creating an ongoing relationship between audiences and creators.

Climate change is reality. It will continue to get worse. If we start sharing stories and building connections around central ideas, people will feel a sense of personal investment in finding solutions.

I'd visited Florida a few times when I was a kid. Never really thought it could just be submerged like that. The refugee stories were, to put it lightly, jarring. I thought these fires were as bad as it could get. I thought COVID-19 was bad. I thought the food shortages were bad. I've never been so wrong. -- Voice Notes, July 2025.

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