Battling with Bart: Transmedia Storytelling and The Simpsons Arcade Game

Abstract
Chater uses Henry Jenkins' theories of cross-platform narratives (vis-a-vis the titular adaptation) to explore not only the problematics of medium transfer, but also the conceptualization of fantasy and interactivity within the game/player dynamic.

Keywords
Transmedia, Henry Jenkins, Simpsons, Video Game, Interactivity

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Communications professor Henry Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling as a process in which “integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.” (Jenkins) In more than twenty years on television, *The Simpsons* has become one of the most-used core texts for a number of transmedia products. One of the earliest products was *The Simpsons Arcade Game*, developed in 1991 by Konami as a side-scroll, beat-em’ up game. (Electronic Gaming Monthly) The background story follows Smithers and Mr. Burns escaping after robbing a jewellery store. As the two pass the Simpsons, Homer accidentally bumps into Smithers, sending a precious stone flying into baby Maggie’s mouth, which is then mistaken as her soother. Smithers kidnaps Maggie and the game begins. Players can use their family member of choice in eight levels which pits them against a plethora of enemies and ‘bosses,’ culminating in a final standoff against Smithers and Mr. Burns at the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. More recently, this game has found new relevance in online-multiplayer gaming as it premiered in Xbox, Playstation and iPhone formats in 2012. (Electronic Gaming Monthly)

Despite this success, it was stated in *Variety’s* review of *The Simpsons Video Game* (released in 2007) that “Homer and Marge's clan has appeared in more than a dozen games since the series debuted in 1989 . . . which suffered from the fundamental flaw of trying to jam the Simpsons into an existing videogame genre.” (Fritz) Specifically, *The Simpsons Arcade Game* is built on the format of the popular *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* arcade game. (Electronic Gaming Monthly) However, it is argued in this paper that *The Simpsons Arcade Game* does not suffer by working in an existing arcade and early console-style aesthetic, but serves the interpretation that it is a game designed for Bart Simpson himself. It can be shown that the intertextual references between the show and the game are too Bart-related to simply be the
incorporation of the key characters into a horizontally integrated franchise product. Every character, enemy, setting, etc. has some sort of referent, even if the two-dimensional arcade-style animation is too rudimentary to make this overt.

First, it is important to consider the relationship between *The Simpsons* and its arcade version in context with transmedia storytelling. If considered under industry models, transmedia storytelling uses a textual expansion of its primary source to develop alternative streams of revenue so a dedicated fan base may actively consume the show’s content. (Scott 320) Certainly, this idea is a relevant force behind the creation of a game such as *The Simpsons Arcade Game*, which is coin-operated, but it is not the only way to consider how transmedia storytelling functions. The idea of deepening audience engagement is described by Jenkins as one function served by transmedia. (Jenkins) According to a study on gaming and virtual worlds, it is said that all games have three dimensions of allure: “a) strategic and tactical objective, b) thematic and fantasy role-playing and c) testing one’s reflexes in an immersive environment using special-purpose interfaces.” (Messinger et. al 2) In consideration of this, transmedia storytelling could also be argued to provide an extension of a core text for the creation of an immersive viewership experience, beyond industry models, that would not be possible otherwise. Rather than passively watching the Simpsons’ misadventures, a fan is invited to actively control this, expanding with the options that are created in a gaming format.

There are several examples of how *The Simpsons Arcade Game* serves as an immersive extension of its core text. First, it is noted that the length of gameplay, that is, how long it takes to play the game properly from start to finish, is approximately 45 minutes, or the length of two episodes of the series. Within this plotline, almost every image that is seen builds on a prevalent iconography developed within the first season of the show. It is first important to note that the
Arcade extension of *The Simpsons* does not aesthetically match the series. In this way, the difference between radical intertextuality, a text making crossovers within the same medium, and transmedia, a text that crosses over through different mediums, (Jenkins) is ensured as the game places these iconographies in backgrounds which best serve the arcade format. As seen in the example below, Moe’s Tavern is presented with many required elements: liquor, the C-shaped bar, Moe answering Bart’s prank phone call and Barney waiting for his next drink (note: Marge is the selected character for this level). However, certain things like the enhanced foreground space, the red color scheme and lack of bar stools serve a function within the game to allow more playing space, reduce distracting objects and providing an easier way to differentiate color scheme. It is noted that every level of the game has a similar aesthetic trait.

Right image from Season 1, Episode 3 “Homer’s Odyssey”

Beyond this, it is important to note that this particular style of arcade game, with many bosses to defeat, is used at a point when there are simply not many villains in the series. This requires characters to be slightly twisted to make the story coherent. One example, among many, is two of the enemies called “Big Mobster” and “Small Mobster,” which are shown to be Bart and Homer when observed
closely. Even though this complicates continuity in narrative storytelling, it derives a way to make a reference to the series without totally alienating its characters. To disguise this error of transmedia storytelling, Homer and Bart are given suits and hats to make them seem villainous. In this example, the original text becomes slightly disconnected because of the limitations of an arcade-style format, but it is not anything that is too obviously contradictory at first glance.

Building from this, it is shown that particular iconographies used within The Simpsons Arcade Game, offer the suggestion that the game is for and about Bart Simpson. In his study of transmedia, Jenkins concludes that, “Transmedia refers to a set of choices made about the best approach to tell a particular story to a particular audience in a particular context depending on the particular resources available to particular producers.” In this case, the Simpsons resource to approach transmedia is centered on Bart who expresses a love of arcade games early on in the show. In the previous example of Moe’s Tavern, it can be shown that Moe on the phone answering a prank call is one instance in which the base layout relies on tropes of the show that involve Bart.

In a more abstract level, called ‘Dreamland,’ as seen above, several of the background elements are surreal visions of Bart’s everyday life. These are seen in the Krusty the Klown moon, Springfield Elementary and finally the Simpson home where the selected character has to
fight a devil-version of Bart himself. Essentially, this is Bart’s dream, wherein he controls the setting, the enemies, action and possibly the central character (should the player select him to play with).

Further from this, *The Simpsons Arcade Game* not only indicates that the game is controlled by Bart within the diegetic world of the game, but is also made for him as a target audience. Jenkins states that, “Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.” (Jenkins) In this particular instance, what is unique is the opening shot of each level which suggests a meta-text wherein *The Simpsons Arcade Game* does not only follow the plotline presented, but a progression of Bart involved outside of the game in some way. In the example of Stage 3 at the Springfield Discount Cemetery, it is shown that the introductory title to each level is Bart either progressing through the game as a player or at the very least, watching it on television. This fits well with the way his character is presented in the core text.

This is not something stated directly, but given the look and size of the hand as well as what is known about the characters, it seems most likely that it would be Bart. More than a transitioning device, the indication of Bart’s hand invites a shared viewership experience between Bart and the player, which amalgamates Bart with the key demographic. His experience fulfills the “thematic and fantasy role-playing” (Messinger et al. 2) aspect of gaming, which becomes more than a forced imposition of the Simpsons into a video game, as suggested by the *Variety* article mentioned previously, but a very likely perspective to bring the Simpsons into
transmedia storytelling. In a subtle way, it heightens coherence and transition between the two vastly different mediums.

Beyond this, it is important to consider how the ‘Bart’ audience is additionally targeted by the game. In an essay on _Family Guy_ by television theorist Nick Marx, emphasis is placed on the importance of content geared toward key demographics, which are young males in the case of these types of television series. (Marx 179) This can extend even as far as to alienate other potential audiences. (Marx 179) It can be noted that other characters in the game are pared down to stereotypes so Bart may be more emphasised. For example, Marge’s weapon is a vacuum cleaner, which reduces her to the stereotype of being a domestic mother. This is not solely because Marge is underdeveloped, as there had been entire episodes about her at this point in the series, but works so that Bart’s references are most evoked. In another example, Homer’s weapon is a bowling ball, not the green bowling ball he has on the show, but a simple black one. A conscious decision has been made to undermine other characters to emphasize Bart. The avatar options are not limited to players, something that gives the game more appeal and makes sense within the diegetic story (everyone wants to save Maggie), but it is likely that Bart is the base character that would ideally be used. With this idea, meta-text works with Bart-related intertextuality to create a channelled frame of reference for a transmedia relay between the show and the game.

It is important to consider that the demographic and social experience of the game has expanded since its initial creation. It has since premiered in Xbox, Playstation and iPhone formats. In these new formats, there is the addition of social media aspects to the game. This is important as intertextual storytelling is not subject to a specific temporality set to the when _The Simpsons Arcade Game_ was made or season one of _The Simpsons_. Instead, it can actually be
expanded upon with time and still work within the interpretations discussed. In the same study of gaming and virtual worlds mentioned previously, it is noted that, “Participation [in virtual worlds] has grown exponentially since 2000, due to improvements in virtual-reality technology (adapted from electronic gaming). (Messinger et al. 10) In new versions of The Simpsons Arcade Game, players can join online teams and use chatting and other networking devices to coordinate group play. As the study further describes, purpose-specific virtual worlds, in which community members are shaped by a common discourse, serve a function of either augmentation or immersion. (Messinger et al. 10) As discussed previously, much of The Simpsons Arcade Game builds on the idea of immersion which is considered as a way for players to “explore behaviours and activities untypical of their real self.” (Messinger et al. 10) In this way, the transmedia-based reading of The Simpsons Arcade Game does not lose merit when new formatting and social-media features are introduced. Instead, the visual cues of ‘Bart-ness’ encourage players to act in a way not typical of themselves, which emulates the experience of a ten-year-old boy playing a video game in an arcade with his friends, be they Milhouse or an online player.

In summation of these points, the integration of the Simpsons into transmedia storytelling is largely based on the appreciation for arcade games which is prevalent throughout the core text. To a seasoned Simpsons fan, the comparison made on the next page (which depicts juxtaposition between The Simpsons Arcade Game and an arcade game from the television series called Touch of Death) is a likely connection as Touch of Death is one of Bart’s favourites in the series.
The *Touch of Death* video game is first seen in Season One, Episode Six “Moaning Lisa”

Homer’s battle and victory dance from the Channel 6 level of *The Simpsons Arcade Game*

It would be undeniable to refute the connection between these two as the episode where *Touch of Death* first appears is an episode which is mentioned in the opening sequence of the arcade game when Lisa’s alias is said to be “Moaning Lisa.” This connection suggests that even if *The Simpsons Arcade Game* is not directly a parody of an arcade game parody; certainly the same intertexts that prompted the aesthetic of *Touch of Death* in the series are coherent with *The Simpsons Arcade Game*.

Of course, it is important to consider how the thematic and larger interpretations of *The Simpsons Arcade Game* as argued for in this essay, work more abstractly with its core text as a true example of transmedia storytelling. Working with intertext and cross-genre tropes, *The Simpsons* television series is said to have several messages as outlined by important developers of the show. Series creator Matt Groening states that he believes the show is meant to depict that “your moral authorities don’t always have your best interest in mind.” (Gray 48) Most notably,
The Simpsons Arcade Game has an unusual plotline, something which is not likely to be featured in an episode of the show, but still has relevance in a transmedia platform as a way to reiterate this same message in a different delivery channel. Each character of the game is driven by a moral requirement to try to save Maggie even if it means sacrificing one of their lives. If taken further into producer George Meyer’s belief that the purpose of this is to “get people to re-examine their world, and specifically, the authority figures in their world,” (Gray 48) the arcade game may be a more literal interpretation of this purpose. Characters are placed into the different world of the arcade game and pitted against unusual or unchallenged authority figures from the show, such as a robot-version of Mr. Burns or an evil bowling ball. In that way, it encourages viewers of the game to re-examine tropes and iconographies created in the series though a different media format.

This abstract thematic reading of transmedia storytelling also alludes to the fact that The Simpsons has largely to do with the idea of self-parody. However, all of this, as well as the arguments further made in this paper are largely subject to interpretation. One of the criticisms that is shared with both the series and the arcade game is that they are too entertaining and too funny to include intelligent meaning, a concept which largely drives the reduction of the game seen in the Variety article. This idea relies on two commonly conceived notions in criticism of the series: first that the show’s use of parody can “risk becoming contained, fawning or sanctimonious” and second, this parody is undercut by the fact that it is still ‘entertainment at the end of the day.’” (Gray 145) But, this type of cynicism does not necessarily discredit this work. First, it is true that the use of parody can morally and objectively propel characters of the series within a work that may stay self-contained (not every Simpsons fan has played the arcade game). As it is shown in this example, Bart is placed in a higher consideration over all others.
However, the possibility for intertextuality exists for those who look closer into aesthetic referents. Quite simply, as one show developer described, “the key about The Simpsons is that you have to be observant to what is going on around you.” (Gray 148) In that way, there is the idea that the further interpretation of transmedia storytelling offers enlightenment for a dedicated fan base. If this is considered with the interpretation of the game as channelled through Bart’s love of video games, it is possible to see how transmedia reconfigures the idea of foreground and background, blurring the two between different mediums. In the series itself, arcade games are a background element. Noiseland Arcade is an often unvisited space that is visible in the background of the show. In the game, the arcade games are the most dominant element, with the show’s iconographies as the background feature. This reversal of emphasis creates reconsideration between foreground and background; what is important is made unimportant in one medium and not the other.

More generally, both the aesthetic observations of The Simpsons Arcade Game and the wider consideration of more abstract concepts between this and its core text are largely centered on Bart as the crux of what designates the entire interpretation of The Simpsons into an arcade game format. In this paper, it is shown that the aesthetic properties of the game, which are subject to the limitations of arcade-style play, all suggest the interpretation that The Simpsons Arcade Game is both for and about Bart Simpson. In this way, Bart is likened to the key demographics of the arcade game. These are further expanded upon in new, socially-gear ed gaming platforms to provide players an immersive experience in which they are invited to become unlike themselves. This argument largely relies on several points made by communications professor Henry Jenkins in the consideration of how transmedia storytelling functions. More abstractly, it is noted that even if certain aspects of this argument are
interpretive, they still underline a discourse between the show and game which is dictated by similar meaning. Further from this, it may be noted that any devaluation of the game, as included initially, may be a result of the era in which it was made, when *The Simpsons* characters, tropes and overall style were not refined enough to be brought into transmedia storytelling. Since that time, fundamental details such as the look and relevance of characters has changed, which has perhaps lead to disdain when the game is considered with the classical Simpsons era which occurred after *The Simpsons Arcade Game*’s release.
Works Cited

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Filmography
