

Foundations of Play and Games: Using Books as Cross-media in Games

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In modern times, the majority of cross media revolves around advancing towards newer media, rather than going back to the older types. Games are mostly made into movies, books are mostly made into movies and movies are often made into games. The common denominator is most often to retain the specific storyline from the previous medium, rather than exploring new directions and paths. In this paper, I will show that cross media can be used even better to also supplement the universes, rather than simply being used to adapt a type of media to another.

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1 Introduction

Games are gradually becoming more than simply being isolated instances of entertainment. New types of media have come into existence, and new connections between these are made all the time in new and creative ways. It started out as adaptations, by translating a given media to another, as these new media rose to power. The lists of works that has been done are close to endless when looking at “book to movie”, “book to games” and, most recently, “movies to games” and vice versa¹. The primary focus is not to compare the ratios between these adaptations, nor argue if either of those are best. One thing that can be said, however, is that the majority of these adaptations happens to mediums that are alike and provide more easily transferable elements, as concluded by Espen Aarseth (2006).

The focus of this paper is to look at the term “cross media”, and how the connection between different media can be used to supplement a given product, rather than simply adapt it to another media. This will primarily be done by looking at books and written media, as I feel this is the most under-represented of the different medias, while still retaining a timeless charm that can be of joy to people across all ages.

One of the things that inspired me to get into the subject, was when an article by Leigh Alexander (2012) started describing how players were liking the great and detailed stories some games had, but ended out being disappointed in the endings, because they did not end *as expected*, which in turn resulted in a general dismay of the story. While I would never argue that in-game storytelling should be neglected, it seemed that so much more can be done to keep a game universe detailed and full of stories by going outside the games themselves.

I was further motivated by another article by Samit Sarkar (2012) stating that the work on a graphical novel had brought Ruiz Velasco² “out of retirement to work on “Hawken: Genesis” because he fell in love with this world.”. It gave a more positive spin, and gave me the first thoughts about the fact that telling a good story, based upon a game-created world, does not need to be told in said game-world.

As such, I will be asking the following question:

How are books/novels used in cross media productions involving games?

To answer the question, I will primarily be taking a look at the “Diablo”-franchise, and compare the methods Blizzard has used to efficiently use books and other written media as a way to expand the franchise by using cross media. Furthermore, the paper will also at the “Assassin’s Creed”-franchise to compare their different uses of books in cross media relations.

2 Cross Media

The term “cross media” is not exactly a new term, and should not need further introduction by itself. There are many different ways it can do be used, as well as different sub-branches. I will primarily be focusing on cross media storytelling, which, as any other kind of cross media, also has different sub-branches.

There has been a lot of debating on how to look at the subject, and as such, I find it useful to take a closer look at how it has evolved through the times, to get a good foundation on the subject. By doing that, I will also use that time to introduce various terms, which supplements and evolves the general perception of cross media, in relation to how books can be used with games.

2.1 Transmedia

When looking at cross-media storytelling, it is important to also mention *transmedia* storytelling, which describes the case when all the different media is needed to grasp the entirety of a story, as described by Henry Jenkins (2003). That is, rather than simply being able to pick one type of media and stick to it to get the full story, the reader/player/viewer is forced to visit other medias to achieve that full effect. It is obvious that there is a very thin line between these two terms, and that it can be rather difficult to separate when it is one and when it is another. This especially applies when discussing the entirety of a story, or simply a story arc. Is it transmedia if a work supplements or adds extra details, that is not necessary to understand a given story, but is still needed to completely understand the complete context in detail?

According to Jenkins, we “need a new model for co-creation - rather than adaptation - of content that crosses media.” (Jenkins, 2003), which is something I can only agree with. Furthermore, Jenkins later published further works related to cross media, which I will get back to in section 2.3. This is also one of the positive things with the “Diablo”-franchise, which I will get more into detail with later in section 3.

2.2 Channels and Roles

Christy Dena (2004) elaborates on the cross media descriptions by classifying channels and different ways of interaction between these. This is an important distinction, as cross media does not necessarily mean cross *different* types of media. In short, she separates it into three overall categories: “cross channel”, “inter-

channel” and “intra-channel”.

- *Cross channel* is what we would usually consider the classic definition of cross media: a connection *across* different types of media, and is as such not a description I will get further into. In relation to the two others, it is however good to see it in comparison.
- *Inter-channel* covers a connection within the same type of media, but still another piece of work entirely. They are often made to function in unison, but with a strong focus on the fact that they are two separate products. For instance, when you would need to play two different games of different genres to get the full experience, or - as Dena herself mentions - the two “Kill Bill”-movies.
- *Intra-channel* is a bit peculiar, as it revolves around being within the same instance of the same type of media. Simply put, if I were to reference another section in this paper, it would be intra-channel. While it might seem rather irrelevant in terms of cross media for games - even more so in their relation to books - it is used by texts that are written to be supplementary encyclopedia-types of works, rather than stories³.

To further facilitate these different channels, Dena (2004) further dubs two roles that a given piece of work can have in relation of importance to a given “story-world”: “story role” and “storyworld role”.

- *Story role* signifies a major element, which is best described - for the purpose of this paper - as the game(s) that establishes the given storyworld with the setting, characters and plot. It is also very important that this is a piece

of work that can be self-contained. It is worth to add that this does not necessarily have to be the origin point.

- *Storyworld role* counts of various supplementary or augmenting pieces of work, that is not necessary for the primary piece of work to function. Instead, it gives an optional way of delving further into the storyworld. Dena (2004) uses various physical “Harry Potter” live elements as examples. It is only logical that all books designed in a cross media relation to games are filed in this category.

All in all, Dena (2004) supplements cross media with some good elaborative terms that further helps to bridge gaps between various types of medias, in a very descriptive and accurate way.

2.3 Adaption and Extension

Henry Jenkins (2011) later returned to describe some reflections on how the discussions revolving transmedia had developed, because the general crowd of people seemed to want to define the expression in a short and precise manner. His reflections mainly focuses on the fact that the subject of cross- and transmedia is constantly evolving, which makes it important that people are open-minded in terms of approaching and analyzing then. The focus I want to bring to those reflections, is the usage of “adaption” and “extension” which is covered very throughout as a primary point. To use Jenkins’ definitions, he describes them in the following way (Jenkins, 2011):

- “Basically, an *adaptation* takes the same story from one medium and retells it in another.”

- “An *extension* seeks to add something to the existing story as it moves from one medium to another.”

These fit the meanings I used in the introductions, with the only exception that I described extensions as supplements. In my opinion, *extensions* is a better word, and more precisely covers the point I was making. Jenkins also mentions that the retelling of an adaption also *extends*, as it is necessary to describe and show things in a manner that was or is not possible in the media it originated from. In the same way, an extension also *adapts* many elements which may be described in great detail already. Working across different types of media has to reshape something, in order to add more things to it.

Still, the expressions “adaption” and “extension” will primarily be used as described in the before-mentioned list, with the minor addition that extensions can also happen inter-channel, as Jenkins’ description seems to indicate that it only applies to other *types* of media.

2.4 Universes

At this point I feel it is a good time to introduce the term *Universes*. It is by no means a new nor unique expression, but is more for practical purposes and to maintain a consistent terminology throughout the paper. With a good overview of what cross- and transmedia covers, it only becomes logical to let this describe a world and setting that *can* - but does not necessarily - cover medias and channels. More exact, based on what has been referenced earlier, Dena’s (2007) view on *storyworlds* fits the description best.

These universes are most often connected to the more general expressions of

*IPs*⁴ or franchise. There is a slight difference, in that these two cover the more financial aspect and named after the work that started it, while universe (and hence, storyworlds) are more a descriptive term to state where the IP takes place, what the setting is and what the *primary* story resolves around.

It is a very loose distinction, but for this purpose I find it important to separate them properly. To try to elaborate further, I find what Espen Aarseth (2006) describes in his article about cross media in regards to “Death Jr.” is better described as the franchise angle, rather than universe. This is partially because of the article’s scope, but also because that specific franchise is *less bound* to a specific universe than “The Matrix”, for instance, is (Dena, 2004).

As part of a lecture on cross media as part of the course (Aarseth, 2012), Espen Aarseth brought forward the a case regarding the “Star Wars”-universe, in relation to the game “Knights of the Old Republic”. The idea was that the game was set several thousand years before the films, which is what the majority of the universe is based upon. This is a great example of how to extend the universe, as it gave a huge amount of creative freedom and removed many limitations, while still being able to retain everything that makes it a solid part of the universe. It built on the premise that a film-to-game adaption would be successful if both “iconic characters”, “interesting universe” and “high concept” could be transferred, which was a subject that Aarseth had earlier mentioned (Aarseth, 2006). Naturally, you would not be able to refer characters from the known story, but considering the gains that is an acceptable loss⁵.

3 A Closer Look: Diablo

The reason I have chosen to focus my study on Blizzard's "Diablo" universe, is because I find it fascinating that Blizzard has managed to create such a detailed and broad universe, which is a method Blizzard uses quite extensively for all their major IPs.

The style of the "Diablo"-games does not directly promote a large and extensive universe, despite the genre originating as a branch of role-playing games. As the games progressed, it became known as the "hack 'n' slash"-genre, and uses a bare minimum of standard role-playing elements.

To keep it relevant to the current times, the points empathized in this section will primarily focus on the latest game in the series - "Diablo III" - but will refer back to the previous games, when needed. The primary reason for this, is that the timespan that has gone since the previous game is over ten years, and the major elements in regards to cross media with books has been happening within that timespan⁶.

Another reason I found it interesting, is in continuation to the article I referenced in the introduction (Alexander, 2012), as the main story of "Diablo III" also got some negative feedback. While I can relate to those thoughts, the game-genre has to be taken into consideration, because the in-game storyline had to be translated while not ruining the fast-paced gameplay. If the narrative has to suffer in order for the universe to grow, expand and evolve, other possibilities has to be looked at.

During this chapter, I plan to look at the different ways Blizzard has used written texts to expand the universe, covering several channels, with references and

interactions across and in between most of these. Cross media is here primarily used for extensions, and Blizzard has kept the primary story entirely in the game, rather than attempting to adapt it to other media.

3.1 In-Game Texts

In order to establish just how important books are in the “Diablo”-universe, it seems only logical to start where it all began, as books - or, as the games tend to call them: tomes - that appeared throughout the games, since the beginning.

In the first game, they served three purposes: teaching magic spells to the player, giving quests or simply giving some bonus background story. The two latter was very often tied together, but sometimes a tome appeared that did not seem to have a purpose other than give the player background information.

The second game used tomes less, and primarily had them as containers for scrolls which allowed the player to have 20 scrolls in two inventory slots rather than 20. As the previous game, they were also used as an occasional quest-object or -trigger, but at a much lesser extend.

In the third game, books were represented in many ways. Not only does texts drop from certain events and quests, but can - more importantly - be found as a bonus all around the game world to give additional background information. The most noticeable addition was the fact that a whole feature had been introduced to give the player a way to *gather* these books and keep them in a journal, that served as a sort of in-game encyclopedia of monsters, characters and places, along with current and past events. This added a lot of both inter- and intra-channeling, and opened up for an optional narrative level.

The most compelling - and probably best - example at this that is used in “Diablo III” happens through the game’s first act, that takes place around the same place as the first game did, where the player visits many of the same locations. One of the first major objectives is to stop the re-risen “Skeleton King Leoric”, which most players would recognize as a boss from the first game. There are several journal-entries that covers his descend into madness. However, there are an even larger amount of entries from a person called “Lachdanan”, which we learn was the one who killed Leoric to end the madness. What is not told, is that this Lachdanan was also a primary character of another much smaller quest from the first game, from which we only knew that he was one of Leoric’s knights. As such, these journal entries added - and elaborated on - quite a few events of the universe by using inter- and intra-channel elements.

3.2 Physical Books

Ever since the first book was published for the Diablo universe, not one of them has been adaptations, and have all supplemented the world with new things. The universe has an advantage in terms of going towards extensions rather than adaptations, by either using characters in their books that are not directly shown in the game, or simply not being more than simple non-playable characters, most of which did not have much background to begin with. Another argument that supports this is that the player has always controlled a nameless hero, rather than a developed character with a rich background. The player is a part of a band of heroes, basically. This further opens up for the possibility of using the games’ classes as characters in stories, without having the disadvantage of disrupting al-

ready established events.

The best example of a good extension to the universe was the “Sin War”-trilogy that was released over the years 2006 to 2007. First of all, it took place in a time long before the games. Secondly, it focused on an event that had only been vaguely described in the game and elaborated on it, thereby maintaining a strong cross channel connection to the games. Thirdly, it extended the universe by introducing new concepts that also had direct ties to ending of the second game, which had been concluded six years before. At this point there had not yet been any official word regarding “Diablo III”, which was announced in the summer of 2008⁷. The combination of the long timespan since the previous game, and the continuous extension of the universe, was a clear enough indication for most fans of the franchise that Blizzard had no plans to discontinue it.

As always, there is an exception to the point of not using iconic characters for extensions, which is in this case is the newest official book “The Order”, which focuses on one of the most iconic characters - Deckard Cain’s - background, as well as another of Diablo III’s core characters, Leah. However, this still counts as an extension, as it supplies information about the characters that are not necessary for the story of the game to be understood.

3.3 The Middle Ground

While there would never really be a true middle ground, some types of written literature stands apart from the standard by moving in slightly different directions, and mixing the borders between various media.

Shortly before the release of “Diablo III”, the book “Book of Cain” was re-

leased, which took a very different approach on how to use a book as an extension, compared to the previous works. Relying on the knowledge that players of the games knew that Deckard Cain was a scholar and lore keeper, and at the same time using the encyclopedia style of writing that was used in the journals of “Diablo III”, it had taken the twist of letting the book appear as if it was written by the actual Deckard Cain. This was represented in more than one way. For the physical appearance the pages were rigid, slightly mis colored and had no real colors other than the ink it was written with. The many drawings was done with the same color as the text, suggesting that this was done by one, who only had a quill to work with. The writing style and wording likewise represented the same, being written with the same tone as players would remember him from the games. It was targeted at the game’s other major character, Leah, to pass on all the valuable information he had gathered over the times, in case he should get lost - which was also one of the sub-plots from the game’s beginning. Additionally, there were added notes outside the margins, often in a more rough font, as if to signify that it was added as an afterthought.

The case of “Book of Cain” becomes rather unique by both utilizing both cross, inter- and intra-channel methods, while also acting as a storyworld role, by being an object that could just as well actually appear in the in-game universe, being designed as such. The purpose was in reality to give the readers an opportunity of brushing up on all the new things introduced to the universe over the past ten years.

As part of the countdown to the game, Blizzard kept a promotional site that would have each of the classes from the game as a focus point, changing every week. Among other things, each of these contained a short novel written by au-

thors chosen by Blizzard. The stories were of the same type as the ones in the physical books, with a set focus of the respectful class of the given week. Later during the year, these were released as a collection in e-book form⁸. Choosing e-books as being in the *middle ground* is more a choice because the main focus of physical books in contrast to video-games. As such, this makes e-books a medium that exists in between those. However, with the increase of e-book readers, it is a relevant media to include.

4 Another Approach: Assassin's Creed

The game series "Assassin's Creed" is another franchise that has also gotten book published within the universe. Contrary to "Diablo", however, these books are primarily adaptations of the games, rather than being extensions. By using this approach, readers are given a new way of getting a glimpse at the story by reading it in book-form.

The question quickly arises on why the primary books has been focused on adaptations, rather than extensions. The games are being presented as "historical action-adventure open world stealth video games", with the focus being on the first word: historical. If we are left with a game that builds on factual events, rather than an imaginary world, the idea of a universe is - potentially - severely limited. With that said, this does in no way mean that it should be defined as a certain delimiter, as there are many successful universes based in the natural world, one such being "Sherlock Holmes", for instance. However, it does require a certain uniqueness and more focus on iconic characters that can carry the universe, rather than the setting itself.

To return to the book adaptations, there is the ever present worry that will inevitably happen when dealing with adaptations: some people will not like it. This is obviously a thing that happens everywhere, but the potential is bigger with adaptations, as there are so many extra details that needs to be taken into consideration. Even if the adaption is a master-piece within the given type of media, even the slightest error can have a huge effect on the fans of the universe.

On the other hand, an argument could be that adaptations were not meant for the same target group as much as extensions are. Worded in another way, adaptations extends the universe to a broader audience, while extensions adapts the universe to be open to a broader audience.

5 Measuring Success

At this point, it becomes interesting to look at a more clear comparison of adaption versus extension - and if it even makes sense to compare them at all, as proposed in the previous section. To do this, I have taken a look at how books from each of the two franchises - Diablo and Assassin's Creed - has been received by the public, to try and measure how well cross media books dealing with extensions and adaptations, respectfully, have fared.

5.1 Gathered Data

For each of the two franchises, I have looked at ratings done by readers from two online book sites, that both deals with both series: "Goodreads"⁹ and "Barnes & Noble"¹⁰, and from each franchise a selection of books have been selected, which are available at both stores. The data will be represented with the average rating

of the books - based on the mutual 1 to 5 rating - also including the amount of votes to achieve that rating. For example: “3.59 (302)” would signify a rating of 3.59 from 302 votes.

Diablo Books:	Goodreads	Barnes & Noble
Sin War: Birthright	3.76 (321)	4.37 (19)
Sin War: Scales of the Serpent	3.81 (231)	4.15 (13)
Sin War: The Veiled Prophet	3.92 (208)	4.33 (12)
The Black Road	3.48 (289)	4.23 (13)
Moon of the Spider	3.75 (183)	4.63 (57)
Average	3.74 (246)	4.34 (23)

Table 1: Diablo Books: Average ratings and votes.

Assassin's Creed Books:	Goodreads	Barnes & Noble
Renaissance	3.62 (1411)	4.17 (116)
Brotherhood	3.99 (747)	N/A
The Secret Crusade	3.96 (606)	4.63 (71)
Revelations	4.17 (373)	4.46 (105)
Forsaken	4.56 (43)	4.83 (6)
Average	4.06 (636)	4.52 (75)

Table 2: Assassin's Creed Books: Average ratings and votes.

5.2 Summing Up

From the data visible in table 1 and 2, it is quite visible that both franchises and types of method for using the universe in a book form has been successful.

6 Conclusion

The reason for writing this paper, was to figure out how books and novels are used in cross media productions involving games. To do this, I primarily chose

to look at the “Diablo”-franchise and secondarily at the “Assassin’s Creed” franchise, each of them with a different purpose in mind.

By looking at how each of these used cross media, I have shown that it can be used to both supplement - or extend - an already existing universe and adapt it to another media very successfully. Rather than arguing if either of them is best, it is better to conclude that readers of both adaptations and extensions agree that both methods works as a cross media channel. Furthermore, the point of which is the better is not important, because they are not mutually exclusive. Both methods can - and should - be used to get the most out of the relations that can be established across different channels.

A further argument to compliment the usage of universes that is open extensions, is that it can promote the fans of the universe to write and produce their own additions, a practice already known as “fan fiction”. The larger the amount of creative freedom, the more potential there is.

As a final note, it can be said that cross media can supplement and expand universes, rather than only being used to adapt into another media, as the similar results suggests that it is at least as viable. This also means that we will likely see much more transmedia, rather than only cross media.

Notes

¹Various lists of these adaptations are easily found throughout the Internet.

²Francisco Ruiz Velasco is a visual and conceptual designer. Some of his

works can be seen at IMDB: www.imdb.com/name/nm2508936/.

³For example, *Book of Cain*, mentioned in 3.3, page 13.

⁴Shorthand for *Intellectual Property*.

⁵It is important to notice that these points are based upon how I perceived the contents of Espen Aarseth's (2012) lecture, the information that was presented and how it related to the subject of cross media.

⁶More concretely, "Diablo II" was published in 2000, where the first book in the "Diablo"-series were also published.

⁷The press release for that can be found at: eu.blizzard.com/en-gb/company/press/pressreleases.html?id=2443828

⁸The announcement of these can seen here: us.battle.net/d3/en/blog/7924405/.

⁹Data pulled at December 11th, 2012 from Goodreads for Diablo at www.goodreads.com/series/54355-diablo, and for Assassin's Creed at www.goodreads.com/series/59131-assassin-s-creed.

¹⁰Data pulled at December 11th, 2012 from Barnes & Nobles for Diablo at www.barnesandnoble.com/s/?series_id=287902, and for Assassin's Creed at www.barnesandnoble.com/s?keyword=Assassin's+Creed.

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