

The “Streaming” Trend of Movie Transmedia Storytelling

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Abstract: Affected by the COVID-19 epidemic, many movies were withdrawn from the cinema and released on streaming media. The movie transmedia storytelling also shows a shift in the broadcasting platform and narrative structure toward “streaming”. Streaming media are more suitable for watching detailed transmedia storytelling works, and it can also facilitate fans to continue the pleasure of watching movies and promote evaluation and interaction, which is conducive to expanding the boundaries of the story narrative universe. However, the “streaming” of movie transmedia storytelling also faces the risk of not being accepted by the traditional movie industry.

Keywords: Transmedia Storytelling; Streaming Media; Movie Industry

Introduction

The concept of “transmedia storytelling” was first introduced by Henry Jenkins in 2003. Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.^[1] Transmedia storytelling is not just the transformation of one medium into another, not the mere reproduction of the original story. Transmedia storytelling is a medium that implies a number of unexplained plot elements that are explored as clues through other media. Jenkins considered The Matrix series (including movies, comics, animated movies, games, etc.) to be an excellent example of transmedia storytelling.

“Streaming media” is a form of digital media that delivers an uninterrupted stream of information from content producers to end users in real time, such as Netflix in the U.S. and iQIYI in China.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, the global movie industry has been hit hard, and many movies have had to be withdrawn from cinemas and released online. For example, in January 2020, the domestic movie *Lost in Russia* was withdrawn from cinemas then sold to ByteDance company and streamed for free. At the same time, the transmedia storytelling of movies has also been trending toward “streaming”, which has led to new changes and advantages.

1. The characteristics of “streaming” trend of movie transmedia storytelling

1.1 A higher percentage of playback platforms choose streaming media

At the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, the production, distribution and release of Chinese movies came to a standstill, and the foreign movie industry was also hit hard, with the U.S. box office dropping 80% year-on-year to just \$2.28 billion in 2020, the lowest U.S. film box office in nearly 40 years. Not only that, the largest U.S. movie theater AMC shares plummeted 70%, on the verge of bankruptcy.^[2] In this situation, the movie industry has to abandon the traditional theatrical release of upcoming movies to the arms of streaming media platforms. For example, *The Matrix Resurrections* chose to be released globally at the same time in cinemas and on the streaming media. The same goes for Marvel’s *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.

1.2 Adaptation of storytelling structure to streaming media

What is more noteworthy is that the movie industry did not just copy movies that could not be released in cinemas then release them in streaming media, but it specifically produced episodes in transmedia storytelling that are suitable for broadcast in streaming media. In the past, the media of transmedia storytelling were mainly in the form of comics, animated movies and games, for example, The Matrix presented an excellent transmedia storytelling model through its comics, animated movies and games. And the current movie transmedia storytelling are increasingly inclined to produce TV series. Starting in 2021, Disney's streaming platform, Disney+^[13], began releasing a large number of Marvel episodes for streaming. Following a bonus scene in Avengers 4: Endgame, Rocky was the first Marvel work to be streamed. In its first week of release, it received the highest Disney+ viewership. In addition, Disney+ also released a series of transmedia storytelling TV series such as Wanda Vision, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier, Hawkeye and so on. In China, the TV series Detective Chinatown has also started to carry out transmedia storytelling, and during the epidemic, it released on iQIYI. It received a 7.1 rating on the Douban platform, almost matching or even surpassing its movies counterpart. It can be seen that, compared to the depression of cinemas, the trend of transmedia storytelling on streaming media is growing. And, this kind of narrative is also welcomed by the general audiences.

2. The Advantages of “streaming” trend of movie transmedia storytelling

2.1 Streaming media are better for watching detailed works

In *Capitalisme et Schizophrenie 2. Mille Plateaux*, G. Deleuze develops the theory of “rhizome”. He describes the postmodern world as a state of “rhizome” rather than a “tree” as described by the early scholars. The transmedia storytelling is similar to a “rhizome” storytelling, where each work is an independent center, but interconnected, constantly reproducing new works, with infinite possibilities for expansion and innovation. For example, Marvel’s TV series Rocky, not only follow the timeline of the theatrical movies, but also expand the new time and space, and these new developments may affect and subvert the original story of the theatrical movies. Because of the “rhizome” characteristic of transmedia storytelling, the stories and plot become increasingly complex. It is difficult for audiences to understand the entire “storytelling universe” and all the clues in a single watching. Someone once asked the Wachowski brothers, the directors of The Matrix, “There are quite a few hidden messages in the movie that I notice the more I watch it. Can you tell me about how many there are?” The Wachowski brothers: “There are more than you’ll ever know.” Whatever clues fans have discovered, the Wachowski brothers are so pleased and they keep hinting that there are more secrets in the movies. The deeper you drill down, the more secrets emerge^[14].

Therefore, watching repeatedly, pausing appropriately, searching the Internet, and communicating with online friends become a necessary skill in watching transmedia storytelling movies. In cinemas, audiences have no control over the progress of movies and therefore have difficulties in getting more details. Now, through streaming media, complex clues can be found in more details. Not only can audiences fast forward and pause easily, but they can also communicate with other audiences through bullet screen or comment area. Even if they miss some key clues, they can notice them when prompted by other audiences.

2.2 Continuing the audience's watching pleasure and promoting evaluation and interaction

In cinemas, audiences have the risk of being late and can't control the pace and speed of the movies. Although they have a relatively good experience, the pleasure disappears as the movie ends. The streaming media give audiences to more control over the time and space. Audiences can get the private movie-watching experience and immerse themselves in the fun of watching movies alone, or watch them in parts and repeatedly. The trend of storytelling to streaming media actually extends the pleasure of

audiences, giving them a feeling that the movie “never ends”. After the end of movies, movies can continue to affect the daily life of audiences in the way of transmedia storytelling, so as to meet the enthusiasm and expectation of the movie fans.

Media convergence and mobile digital technology make “interaction” a key word in movie consumption. The “streaming” trend of movie transmedia storytelling also facilitates audiences to post comments, secondary creation, parodies and “brainstorms” on streaming media, which may even become the plot source of subsequent movies.

3. The risk of “streaming” trend of movie transmedia storytelling

For the movie industry, the process of “media convergence” has been somewhat rejected and hindered by traditional filmmakers. The French movie industry has strict rules that require all movies selected for the Cannes International Film Festival from 2018 to be released in French cinemas, effectively prohibiting them from appearing on streaming media for three years after their theatrical release, according to French law. Meanwhile, the Cannes International Film Festival banned movies produced by Netflix from entering. A series of directors such as Christopher Nolan have refused to cooperate with streaming companies. All of these phenomena mean that traditional movie industry has not fully embraced streaming media, and even despise and resist calling some media content “movie”. Traditional filmmakers often maintain a belief in the supremacy of theatrical cinema, fearing that streaming media will deplete the aesthetics of movies and diminish the watching experience. As a result, the “streaming” trend of movie transmedia storytelling also faces the risk of reduced professional recognition and loss of watching impressions^[15].

Conclusion

Despite the controversies, the “streaming” trend is already underway. For transmedia storytelling, “streaming” makes it easier for fans to dig into the details and continue the pleasure of watching movies, but it also has the risk of not being accepted by the movie industry. However, the “streaming” of movies does not mean that the quality of movies will be reduced, and it will bring more positive and new possibilities for the expansion of story boundaries for the huge storytelling universe. What’s more, the “streaming” of transmedia storytelling does not mean that streaming media replace traditional cinemas completely, but that streaming media become part of the storytelling universe. In the future, while streaming media will be welcomed by audiences, it will also be more tolerant and accepted in the industry.

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