

# Chapter 41

## Thresholds of Transmedia Storytelling: Applying Gérard Genette's Paratextual Theory to *The 39 Clues* Series for Young Readers

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### ABSTRACT

*Much scholarly attention has been paid to how new media call for and influence the development of new literacies, but less focus has been given to exploring the underlying structure and mechanisms of projects that incorporate multiple media. Transmedia stories represent a particularly complicated and compelling type of multimedia project because of the high degree of integration among the components and resulting demand for sophisticated reading and interpretive practices. This chapter proposes a model for analysis of transmedia projects based on Gérard Genette's Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation and uses Scholastic, Inc.'s The 39 Clues as a case study for its application.*

### INTRODUCTION

In a world where children are bombarded with messages in multiple media and limiting “screen time” has become a daily battle in many households, exploring how stories that develop across multiple media demand new literacies and consider readers as consumers has become a central concern of children's literature and media scholars (Sekeres, 2009; Sekeres & Watson, 2011; Dusenberry, 2010). As part of both promoting

and taking advantage of new literacies, publishers have increasingly turned their attention toward developing stories that are deployed across, and therefore require engagement across, multiple media: HarperTeen's *The Amanda Project* (2009), Running Press's *Cathy's Book* (2006), Random House's *Fairy Godmother Academy* (2009), Dial's *The Looking Glass Wars* (2006), and Scholastic's *Skeleton Creek* (2009) and *The 39 Clues* (2008) are all examples of this type of story (Hill, 2010). Since transmedia projects consist of collaboration

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8200-9.ch041

across multiple media (and in some instances, such as *The 39 Clues*, within a series in a single medium), a single author does not exist as such for the project as a whole, so I have indicated the publisher of each project for reference above. For a list of specific authors and websites associated with each project, please see Appendix 1.

Publishers/producers as well as media critics and scholars have adopted the term “transmedia” as one way of labeling these types of projects. At the most basic level, transmedia means “across media” (Jenkins, 2011, para. 7), which emphasizes that connections between components are crucial to building and engaging with these stories. While many writers have offered definitions and theories of transmedia, media scholar Henry Jenkins initially adopted it in 2003 and has developed it extensively through multiple books and blog posts. So, for the purposes of this paper, I will largely rely on Jenkins’ elaboration of this term. Jenkins (2011) defines “transmedia storytelling” as “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*” (para. 4, emphasis original).

Many studies of *The 39 Clues* and other transmedia stories for young readers have focused on the potential of transmedia projects to engage young readers in learning and developing new literacy skills (Bowler, et al., 2012; Gutierrez, 2012; Lamb, 2011; McDonald & Parker, 2013). However, relatively little attention has been paid to examining how the mechanisms and logic of the parts of a transmedia project shape the reader’s engagement with the story. Gérard Genette’s paratextual theory offers a conceptual framework that we can potentially use to analyze the form and functions of transmedia narratives. In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette (1997) lays out a vocabulary and a logic for analyzing how the author and publisher disperse information about a text through various elements that surround the text

(e.g., title, preface, dedication, interviews with the author) in order to shape the reader’s experience of and interaction with that text. It makes sense, then, to use Genette’s formulation as the basis for analyzing how the producers of a transmedia story disperse information through multiple channels in order to shape the audience’s interaction with and experience of the fictional world of the project. Furthermore, the transmedia storytelling emphasis on building a fictional world (Jenkins, 2007, 2011) leads us to consider the ways that the various elements of a transmedia narrative offer the audience a path into that world. Genette’s (1997) conception of the paratext as a “threshold...that offers the world at large the possibility of stepping inside” the world of the text or “turning back” from that world (p. 2) also invites consideration of transmedia narrative components in terms of text and paratext.

While Genette’s concepts mesh well with the analysis of a transmedia project, the nature of transmedia storytelling requires revision and expansion of specific spheres of Genette’s theory. Other scholars have laid a foundation for using Genette’s work as a springboard for paratextual theories of different media. In *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, Jonathan Gray (2010) examines how a myriad of paratexts shape our understanding of the worlds of film and television shows and argues for a much more expansive idea of text and paratext that is inflected by the reader. Birke and Christ (2013) examine how the digitization of films as DVDs and books as e-books foregrounds problematic aspects of Genette’s ideas of the materialization, authorization, and boundaries of the paratext, which becomes especially relevant in applying paratextual theory to a transmedia narrative. McCracken (2013) expands Genette’s model to consider the paratexts of e-books. She notes that “new paratexts sometimes move beyond Genette’s precise formulations, but continue to function in the spirit of his analysis” (p. 106). She

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