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The Map Is Not the Territory. Bible and Canon in the Transmedial World of *Halo*

Maps are not only about space, they're also about time: maps are frozen journeys. [...] Indeed it would seem that quite a few writers think cartographically, especially writers about imaginary places. (ATWOOD 2011: 70f.)

Abstract

Building on Henry Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling as »the art of worldmaking« (JENKINS 2006: 114), which puts the world at the center of storytelling, this article focuses on two tools for the apprehension of a transmedial world from a perspective which takes into account the specificity of media and production: the transmedial »bible« and the »canon«. For this purpose, I use as an example the entertainment franchise *Halo* (343i), which originated in the videogame *Halo. Combat Evolved* (2001).

1. Introduction

Henry Jenkins has refined his definition of transmedia storytelling over the years, but has kept the idea that it is »the art of world making« (JENKINS 2006: 21). Jenkins' already classical definition of transmedia storytelling in *Convergence Culture* is:

Stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products. (JENKINS 2006: 293)

This definition allows us to see, on the one hand, the differences between storytelling and the particular case of transmedia storytelling, as the former mainly focuses on the events and the characters, while the latter focuses on the idea of a world. Indeed, one of the key elements of the specificity of transmedia storytelling arises from its focus on the concept of a transmedial world. While details of the diegesis¹ are not absolutely needed in verbal narrative, in transmedia storytelling, the world must be depicted more completely, given that the universe (space-time, characters, actions) needs to be described. On the other hand, while transmedia storytelling is defined as this art of ›world making‹, the concept of world referred to by Jenkins has not yet been clearly defined. In this article, I will examine two ways of materializing this idea of a world: the territory (not just in terms of visualization, but also in terms of space-time, characters, and events), and the map, as a way to organize and structure the materialization of such an idea of a transmedia storytelling world.

The case of the universe of *Halo*, of great interest for many reasons, drew my attention in 2008, when it was announced that an external company, Starlight Runner Entertainment, would advise the company and the developers of 343 Industries regarding *Halo*'s transmedial expansion. The news announcing the creation of a transmedial bible to expand *Halo*'s universe in a coherent manner, avoiding or repairing some inconsistencies that had previously occurred in the crossmedia expansion of *Halo*, implied a distancing from the traditional models of the 1990s and a move toward a new form of franchise. In addition, recent statements by the company's executives clearly indicated their interest in changing the direction of the transmedia storytelling technique theoretically developed by Henry Jenkins (cf. JENKINS 2003; 2006). *Halo* is a science fiction video game franchise that involves video games, books, comics, web series, and much more. The video game was created by Bungie, a video game developer based in the United States, and was originally launched back in 2001 under the title *Halo. Combat Evolved*. It is a first-person shooter in which the player controls the Master Chief, also known as John 117, a super soldier who is part of the ultra-secret Spartan Project fighting in the 26th-century war of mankind against a conglomerate of alien races known as the Covenant. The gameplay of the first video game was located on a ring-shaped alien structure called Halo, a weapon that the aliens tried to control to destroy the universe, but further parts of the series moved its story's location to other planets and even to Earth in the fight of man-

¹ Diegesis as *diégèse*, as used by the French filmic studies since Étienne Souriau (cf. SOURIAU 1951). Here, *diégèse* refers to the world of the filmic work, and it is different from the concept of diegesis in Plato and Aristotle. For Alain Boillat, one filmic work offers a universe made of several diegeses, each one of them defined by an ontological status and a set of laws (cf. BOILLAT 2014: 91).

kind—and, in particular, of the Spartan soldiers—against several aliens. The *Halo* universe continues to expand via new material such as the fifth and latest video game in the franchise, *Halo 5: Guardians* (with an unconfirmed release date of October 2015), which has been supplemented with a comic book series called *Halo: Escalation* (2013–), and a new upcoming game, *Halo: Spartan Strike* (2015), along the lines of *Halo: Spartan Assault* (2013). In addition, a completely new series of books is prepared to move the story of the *Halo* universe forward, including several full-length novels in print and, for the first time, a collection of shorter stories only available in digital form.² Finally, a live-action series to be produced by Steven Spielberg, *The Halo Television Series*, has just been announced.³ The industrial infrastructure of *Halo*, with different developers in the course of its history, is another factor that helps explain the complex evolution of its universe.

2. Transmedial Worlds

The influence of media theorist Henry Jenkins and his concept of transmedia storytelling has played an essential role in the development and transmedial change of the *Halo* franchise universe, which belongs to Microsoft. Likewise, the idea of a world is essential in studies interested in transmedial narratives and transmedia storytelling, as well as in different spheres of transmedial production (cf. BERNARDO 2011; JENKINS 2006; LONG 2007; PRATTEN 2011; RYAN/THON 2014). Using the so-called *Halo* universe as an example of the application of transmedia storytelling, this article is also interested in the perspective provided by Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca (cf. KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2004, 2014), which aims at improving the design of video games based on worlds such as *The Lord of the Rings*. The concept of a transmedial world and its core elements was developed by Klastrup and Tosca as a framework detailing »how to look at transmedial traits in a world« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2004: n.pag.), particularly focusing on the analysis of what they call cyberworlds.

Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the »worldness« (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world's worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time. Quite often the world has a cult (fan) following across media as well. (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2004: n.pag.)

Transmedial worlds are thus »mental constructs shared by both the designers/creators of the world and the audience/participants« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014: 297). In consequence, the world is no longer defined by a media

² <https://www.halowaypoint.com/en-us/community/blog-posts/canon-fodder-novel-ideas> [accessed March 15, 2015].

³ <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-06-16-343s-master-plan-for-halo-5-guardians> [accessed March 15, 2015].

platform, but instead by a shared idea of the world which the authors call ›worldness‹. For Klastrup and Tosca, the elements of transmedial world worldness are *mythos*, *topos*, and *ethos*. *Mythos* refers to the foundational story of the world, the »defining struggles« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014: 297). It also comprises the legendary characters and the main characters and creatures unique to this world. *Topos* is the setting of the world, in space and time. It also »shows how places have changed and events have unfolded« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014: 297). And lastly, *ethos*, which is the »moral codex of behavior for characters« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014: 297) and, generally, the ethics of the whole world.

Against this background, I would like to briefly consider those transmedial universes or worlds whose origins are found in a video game, as part of an approach that follows the study of intermedial relationships between video games and their film adaptations. I am conscious, though, that this concept—transmedial world—needs to be completed and in time dialogically criticized from the theoretical perspective of intermediality, as, according to Jan Baetens and Dimingo Sánchez-Mesa, the study of transmedial imaginary worlds should not be considered a step beyond intermedial and adaptation studies, but rather a trend that can be better understood precisely from within that paradigm: »[i]ntermediality, in other words, is not only the general term that defines the relationships between autonomous media, it is also the term that identifies the internal plurality of each medium« (BAETENS/SÁNCHEZ-MESA 2015: n.pag.).

However, it is still necessary to consider the materiality of the transmedial world offered by the *Halo* franchise and of the history through which it is articulated. Transmedial worlds such as the *Halo* universe reveal the complexity mentioned above, entailing precision in respect to the settings of their universe, characters, storyline, and events that requires, both on the part of their audience and their producers, a knowledge of those elements that goes beyond a shared mental image, that entails the support of a series of guidelines and tools for the exploration, comprehension, and enjoyment of said worlds, enhancing the importance of the relationships that are established among the different media and their specificities.

Therefore, I will first discuss transmedial bibles, a tool developed for the transmedial production of these worlds, and then focus on the canon of the different works which constitutes, in different media and platforms, a large part of the territory of the transmedial world. Both tools establish a connection between the history, the past, and the future of the *Halo* universe, and the media and platforms in which its characteristics unfold, such as certain events or specific stories of some of its characters, among others.

3. The Transmedial Bible. The Map

From the producers' perspective, bibles were used from the beginning of television series as a way to ensure the coherence of the series. Mark J.P. Wolf argues that bibles are used to preserve the ›narrative thread«:

Thus, for larger worlds, world databases or »bibles« are often used by world-builders to monitor consistency, and also to standardize world-based facts and history when multiple authors are contributing to the same world. (WOLF 2012: 201)

Particularly in the context of transmedial franchises, authors have leaned on tools such as these bibles to develop their stories. The map that producers have of the transmedial world is a transmedial bible that is well-defined from the beginning in the case of projects initially created as transmedia, but may also be subsequently (re)elaborated, as is the case with *Halo*, on the basis of canonical material and under the influence of other non-canonical material, such as the material elaborated by fans. One way or another, the audience, fans, and researchers of a transmedial world tend to lean on its canon.

The *Halo* bible cannot be accessed by the general public; it is only accessible for persons authorized by 343i and by Microsoft. Thus, some details are only available through statements made by persons who have worked on the bible, some of which I have used in this article. The split of Bungie and the arrival of 343 Industries in 2010 implied that Microsoft hired the services of Starlight Runner Entertainment, a company specialized in transmedial storytelling. In an interview published in the *Official Xbox Magazine* in May 2011, its CEO, Jeff Gómez, explained some details of the task of making the *Halo* transmedial bible. It is worth quoting some of his declarations here:

In general, our mythologies describe what is currently known about the canonical universe. Where there might be speculation, we quote the fact that this may or may not be true. The aim of these bibles is not to dictate to writers, producers and creators what they must write. It is to give them the facts, so that they can invent some new, cool, exciting stuff. So we purposely leave the holes that we find. It is not our job to fill every blank, because in those blanks could be fantastic stories. So they are not hyper-geeky, every blade of grass, every tree, that kind of thing. But where the facts are the facts: what weapons are established, what alien races are established and so forth, what are their personae and so forth. We've got all that in there.⁴

The *Halo* transmedial bible takes into account the mythologies and the canonical universe, and also proposes new ways of expansion, namely the holes or gaps. But it is evident that not everything can be pre-established or written. Just like the universe or world to which it refers, the bible is more a document that bears witness to the past, even though it includes some hints at the future. To Jeff Gomez' comments, we can add those of Armando Troisi, the Narrative Director of 343 Industries, at the Game Developers Conference

⁴ The original address www.oxmononline.com/talking-man-who-assembled-halo-bible-microsoft has been erased and re-directs browsers to another site. »Talking with the man who assembled the ›Halo Bible« for Microsoft« is an interview published on Mai 12, 2011 by Kevin W. Smith in the *Official Xbox Magazine*. Numerous references to this interview, which the author downloaded in PDF format, can be found on the Internet. <https://archive.today/Jcs1b> [accessed March 15, 2015].

in San Francisco in 2012, at which he and Kevin Grace gave a lecture entitled »Building Transmedia Worlds in Halo 4«. ⁵ During the question and answer section, Armando Troisi rejected the idea of a bible that provided an endpoint, or that could offer a glimpse of a far-away future:

The further you look into the future, the less you know [...]. This idea of the giant story bible, going ten years into the future, and it is three thousand pages long, and all the rest of it, that really doesn't survive. The idea is [...] moving forward, so you have an idea what direction you are going. But as things move further on you have less and less detail. So maybe five years from now we have a paragraph, which describes what we want. (Transcription N.R.)

If the bible of a transmedial production or expansion aims, on the one hand, at being the map of the territory of a transmedial narrative in order to perform future movements, it is obvious that this requires constant updating as a working document that imposes the limits of the idea of a world, but that, by establishing these limits, also specifies the territories to be conquered. It is thus a dynamic working document, like the universe it reflects, a territory in expansion, whose history is not closed, as in the case of the *Halo* franchise. This map has to leave room for future events and discoveries, which will be the expansions of the universe in the form of other games of the series or narrative-type expansions, ranging from novels to series, films, or comics. On the other hand, its usefulness also stems from the fact that, the larger and more detailed a world is, the easier it is for inconsistencies to occur in the canonical material (cf. WOLF 2012), as highlighted above. In consequence, it is also a tool to control and repair said inconsistencies.

When this idea of a world is extremely complex and starts generating problems for its continuity, it is usual to see that the next move is to split into parallel worlds, as has often occurred in television, film, and comics franchises such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *X-Men*. These are dynamic worlds with unexplored territories and gaps left for future expansions. The shared image or idea that fans have of such a world can border on material belonging to other companies or other periods, as in the case of *Halo* and Bungie's video game *Marathon* (1994). An image of the border or beyond the border can materialize in fan art, different fan fictions, or the appearance of machinimas that have become historic in the universe of *Halo*, such as the interview program *This Spartan Life* (2005–) or the parodic series *Red vs. Blue* (2003–). Perhaps it is of greater interest to consider what part of *Halo*'s world has been reflected in the bible, rather than give it the value of a prophecy. This is particularly true as the bible is built on the canon of the transmedial world, which is what fans and audiences share with the producers.

Fans are a key element from the perspective of transmedia storytelling. Defined by Jenkins as »hunters« and »gatherers« of information (cf. JENKINS 2006: 129), moved by an encyclopedic desire, they also develop their own maps in the form of wikis, timelines, specific topics in forums, channels in

⁵ <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1016603/Building-Transmedia-Worlds-in-Halo> [accessed March 15, 2015].

social networks, etc. However, the content generated by these users also includes non-canonical elements.

4. The Canon of *Halo*. The Territory

When we discuss transmedial worlds, the term canon does not refer to the institutional canon of a set of literary or artistic works in connection with a specific author, period, or culture. Rather, it refers to the set of works from the producers of the transmedial franchise, who represent its transmedial world. The canon differs depending on the original medium: in the case of worlds originating from major franchises, it can refer to the set of novels, films, or games that initially represented said worlds. In some cases of major franchises, such as *Star Wars* and *Halo*, the canon is endorsed by the producers of the franchise. The work that is not officially endorsed by the franchise is normally considered outside the canon, although there can be other work that comes from the franchise but is not included either. In the case of *Halo*, this applies to the trailers of the video game promotions in E3 (the trade fair Electronic Entertainment Expo), which do not form part of *Halo's* canon until the contents shown coincide with the video games subsequently launched.

This article is interested in the canon insofar as it represents part of the idea of a world that is accepted by the producers of a franchise. The territory, the materialization of the idea of a transmedial world, is built by the canon, but also by the works that do not belong to the canon. The content generated by users may exert an influence and permeate the canonical content. The canon thus raises two different problems: there can be material generated by the producers that is not canonical and part of the material generated by users can end up influencing future expansions, and thus form part of the canon. For *Wolf*, whether or not the new material is considered growth depends on its canonicity and authorship (cf. WOLF 2012: 246). Transmedial narratives are often created without an established canon. However, *Star Wars* has an official canon, formerly established by Lucasfilm and now in the hands of the Disney Company. The official canon is kept in the continuity database called ›Holocron‹, with Leland Chee currently in charge.

At present, with the development of the official *Halo* website, *Halo Waypoint*, Microsoft and 343i provide, in the section *Halo Universe*,⁶ all types of details regarding events and characters of the *Halo* universe, together with their history and a list of the media and platforms where they appear. This is very significant, as they use the website not only to give a map to their audience but also to establish the *Halo* universe canon. Moreover, their forums house discussions about the canon and the blog *Cannon Fodder* examines recent additions to the canon. Prior to this improvement, the so-called *Halo* canon was (re)constructed entirely by fans in the forums and also in different

⁶ <https://www.halowaypoint.com/en-us/universe> [accessed March 15, 2015].

wikis, on the basis of conversations and statements of the developers and the producers of the franchise. The canon was compounded based on the official *Halo* products, and the policies about canon were established in at least two of the most important fan pages, *Halo Nation* and *Halopedia*: »Canon« is defined as characters, locations, and details that are considered to be genuine (or official), and those »events, characters, settings, etc., that are considered to have inarguable existence within the Halo Universe.«⁷ This superior canon comprises, in an ascendant manner, the following: current 343 employee statements; *Halo* games, *Halo* literature, *Halo* soundtrack; and other media. It is specifically stated that announcement trailers are not considered canon, as their details usually appear very early in the storyline, and do not necessarily contain content that makes it into the final game, even though they constitute important glimpses of the *Halo* world in their own right.

It can be difficult for a single individual to consider and study all the canon of a transmedial world. *Halo* fans share information through digital media that encompass this world, and their activities, which include building timelines, genealogies, maps, walkthroughs, machinimas, collecting Easter eggs and cinematic fragments, fan art, fan fictions, etc., form part of their perception and construction of the mental image to which Klastrop and Tosca refer. Hence, I believe that the simple classification of »hunters« and »gatherers« proposed by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (cf. JENKINS 2006: 129) should be revised and perhaps adapted to the specific case of transmedial worlds that originate in a video game, as the long history of collaboration among players is added to other practices proper of the fans of transmedial worlds that originate in more traditionally narrative media.

5. Maps and Territories

According to Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is the art of building worlds. Klastrop and Tosca indicate that, in designing an expansion of these worlds, it is necessary to bear in mind some of their characteristics, their worldness.

For me, beyond this »mental image«, the territory and the map are materializations of the idea of the world, but the latter organizes and structures the territory's materiality, taking into account the idea of the world. For the producers, the map is the production bible (among other similar working papers) which allows planning and developing canonical expansions, containing both canonical and non-canonical, but potentially important, information. Among the audience, the elaboration of wikis and other shared data documents are also maps, with canonical and non-canonical information.

I am interested in the case of *Halo* due to the movements made in the direction of a conscious strategy of expansion of its characters' history and

⁷ Cf. <http://halo.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Canon> [accessed March 15, 2015].

stories through the use of transmedia storytelling, which became particularly visible during the preparations to launch *Halo 4*, but which started even earlier. Through the use of a transmedial bible, the importance of narrative in the whole universe developed—from the beginning of the Bungie era, *Halo* has been characterized by a concern for history without putting aside the specificity of the video game from which it originates. The transmedial bible, which is a working document, does not entail the absolute determination of the *Halo* universe, but reveals the interest for continuity and consistency that the audience and players demand of the producers. It is a schematic map of this universe which also takes into account the media and platforms used.

The video game origins of a transmedial world are of interest, among many other reasons, due to the former's possibilities as a medium able to hold such a large amount of information, to the behavior of its fans, who come from more participatory environments, and to the gradual change of the relevant model of production due to economic and commercial as well as technical reasons, with new media that increase the possibilities of expansion of the franchise in new, original ways.

All of these details are needed to design video games and can be used again in future narrative expansions, since their worlds, settings, and characters are conceived to be heard and seen—and, in some cases, manipulated. The work devoted to research and design can be used to develop other products of the saga, including the proliferation of sequels that take advantage of all this information, but it also imposes certain constraints. This is why it is simpler to generate narratives that expand rather than reformulate the given universe—although this occurs, of course, in other transmedial expansions of worlds that do not originate in video games, such as television, film, and printed media. Moreover, the specificity of video games entails other important advantages, such as the experiential dimension or capacity to generate emotions, as highlighted by Perron:

Jouer à un jeu vidéo ne consiste pas seulement à comprendre une histoire, mais plutôt à résoudre des problèmes, à triompher d'obstacles, à affronter des adversaires, à explorer un monde virtuel, etc. Les actions du gamer et les réactions de ce monde vont bel et bien susciter des émotions d'une autre nature, des émotions vidéoludiques [*gameplay emotions*]. (PERRON 2006: 358)

The effect of these aspects of production, the construction and mapping of the world by means of different mechanisms, is also interesting for other reasons, such as the seriality observed not only in the successive deliveries of the game but also in other products of the franchise that seem to aspire to being more than mere satellites and are geared toward attracting other audiences—bearing in mind that *Halo* belongs to Microsoft, a company that seeks to attract many different kinds of audiences. We must also take into account the technical advances of consoles, which allow players to enjoy narrative audiovisual products, as mentioned above.

Transmedial world production mechanisms, ranging from the use of directives to plan its development, such as the bible and other working doc-

uments, via the establishment of a canon by means of recreational products and franchised narratives, to direct contact with the core of the most active fans through different media, including the Xbox Live service or the *Halo Waypoint* site, represent attempts to control the franchise. Within these limits, unexplored or unknown territories, the gaps in the history of the world and of its main and secondary characters, are potential expansions that intensify the audience's interest. However, continuing with the analogy of a map, the canon—the world's legal boundaries—does not have to coincide with its geographical limits. I am referring to the border territories not completely controlled here, such as fan art or fan fictions, or the weight that memories of *Marathon* still have among *Halo* fans, for example. Furthermore, the role of such unique cases as the machinimas *Red vs Blue* or *This Spartan Live*, which have had an influence on certain aspects of successive deliveries of the video game, is not clear either.

The example used is geared at illustrating the interesting change of a major entertainment franchise toward so-called transmedia storytelling, and the attention paid to coherence and continuity inside the *Halo* universe. In line with the questions discussed in this article, other matters of interest for future consideration include the distinction among fans of transmedial worlds that originate in a video game, assessment of the capacity of video games to generate transmedial worlds as compared to the capacity of traditional narrative media, or, to continue with the cartographic analogy, the manner in which the canon's political frontiers are established in respect to the fandom's geographic territories and to the content generated by users.

To sum up, transmedia storytelling, according to Jenkins' definition, focuses on the world, while in a verbal production the world is less important, as quite often diegesis and action are set apart, which is not possible in transmedial storytelling. It is necessary, then, to reformulate this concept taking into account not only the spatio-temporal dimension but also characters and events, what this article has called the territory.⁸ This explains the importance of the production of maps by the producers and the audience of transmedial narratives that are developed around the idea of one specific world.

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⁸ »The map is not the territory« (KORZYBSKI 1933: 750) is an expression coined by Alfred Korzybski at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. It means that the representation is not the reality, the map therefore is only a way to represent the reality.

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