

An Experience Approach to Transmedia Fictions

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Abstract

This chapter proposes a method to account for transmedial experiences of reception. It is built upon our transmedial world model and illustrated through the analysis of *Regency Love*, a videogame set on the world of Jane Austen. We argue that researching transmedial experiences in a holistic way requires a hybrid approach that combines an aesthetic/formal analysis with the qualitative investigation of user reception. This experiential perspective manages to avoid the limitations of an exclusively textual focus (preoccupied with questions of canon and adaptation) and a purely fandom perspective (dealing exclusively with identity and social interaction).

Introduction

Frodo is badly hurt, his shoulder pierced by a Morgul blade. His life his ebbing away as his face turns pale, then nearly blue. The Nazgul are closing in and Aragorn cannot get the hobbits out of danger quickly enough. But then, help arrives. Arwen, the elven princess, saves Frodo from the galloping Nazgul in an amazing horse chase across the forest. I let out a long-held breath when they get to safety. I am awed, relieved, and puzzled. This is December, 2001, and I am watching *The Lord of the Rings* in the cinema in its premiere day. I am an avid reader of Tolkien's books, and a veteran player of the *Middle Earth* role playing game. Arwen should not have appeared in this part of the narrative, according to canon, so her presence bugs me a little, but how important is literal adaptation of the novels? It was actually a nice scene, and it is good that she gets more screen time. I remember how frustrated I was as a teenager that there were no females in the fellowship of the ring. In fact, in my roleplaying troupe, I have played a character like her, who gets to do all sorts of exciting things. I make a mental note of checking the Tolkien fora as soon as I get home to my computer. I bet the hardcore fans are not satisfied with this change and I need to get into that discussion.

The transmedial experience of watching a movie like *Lord of The Rings*, which belongs to a vast transmedial world (Klastrup and Tosca 2004) is a complex affair, where we interpret, get emotionally involved, and access our memories or repertoire of knowledge about the transmedial universe. We not only react to the scenes we are watching, but also to how they compare to everything else we know about the world, and to what others know and think about the world. Like any other experience, a transmedial experience affects our senses, engages our intellect and is embedded in our everyday life in various ways. This chapter looks at transmedia fictions through an experiential lens, and proposes a model to understand and analyze transmedial experiences, taking their specificity into account. We illustrate our model by applying it to a case, the Jane Austen inspired game *Regency Love*.

The Transmedial Experience

From the beginning of our transmedial research, we have been interested in transmedial worlds (TMWs) as acts of the imagination, that is, as mental images gradually built from diverse encounters with fictions that share the same universe, and which become into existence in acts of aesthetic reception: “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)” (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 1). This *worldness* can be further described by using the concepts of mythos, topos and ethos, which respectively refer to the backstories that explain the TMW, its settings (places and peoples) and the philosophy and ethics that make sense in that world (ibid.).

Our transmedial world framework is heavily indebted to classic reception theory and its focus is on the incompleteness of fictions (Iser 1978; Eco 1979; Jauss 1982). Users (readers/viewers/players) need to perform interpretive and emotional work in order to aesthetically experience the narrative they interact with. Works of representational art inhabit a grey ontological zone in that they both exist beforehand and become through the art of aesthetic consumption. Reception theory is a phenomenological approach that builds upon the concept of experience as investigated by philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Ingarden, among others (Armstrong 2005). We are also inspired by an interaction design approach to experience, in particular by the emphasis of this field on the bodily situatedness of any experience (Dourish 2001) and the idea of experience as felt-life made of several threads: sensual, emotional, compositional and spatial&temporal (McCarthy and Wright 2004).

We have earlier argued that any encounter with a transmedial product will evoke all the knowledge and affect that the user associates with the particular TMW, which will then be rearranged in the light of the new incorporation (Klastrup and Tosca 2011). The transmedial experience is thus the actualization (by a user) of a TMW's *worldness* as manifested in a concrete platform with its corresponding affordances (Tosca and Klastrup 2016). Thus, the transmedial experience is always situated, both in time (in relation to previous and future encounters with the TMW), in space (the materiality of the medium also plays a part), and in the body of the user, who is involved sensorially, intellectually and emotionally. Expectations, nostalgia, and various forms of transmedial desire (Tosca 2015) play a part in motivating and directing the interaction, that we have previously illustrated as seen in Figure 1 (Tosca and Klastrup 2016).

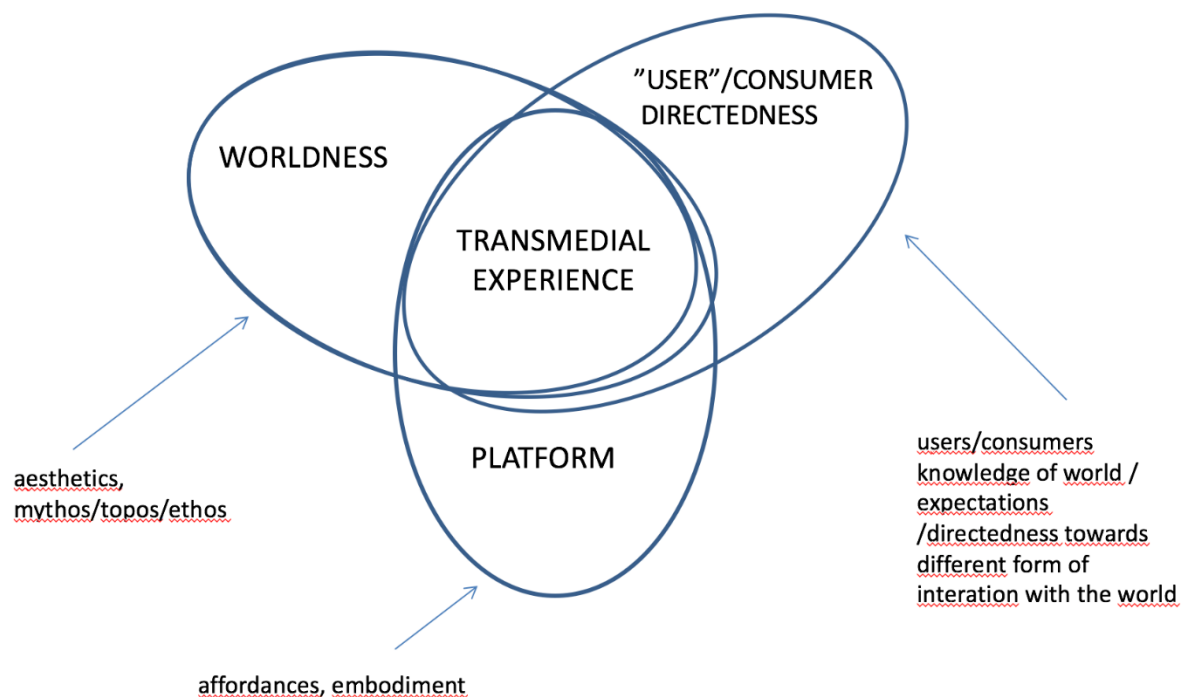


Figure 1: A model of transmedial experience

The vignette we used at the beginning of this article would be a good illustration of this situatedness. Our encounter with the *Lord of the Rings* first movie prompted hermeneutic work, not only at the diegetic interpretive level (to understand what is being shown on screen) but also activating our memory and the repertoire of the Tolkien TMW (to evaluate how what we are seeing fits or does not fit with the canon, in other words, complies to the *worldness*). This process is not merely intellectual, but embedded in a myriad of emotions, again related to different times. That is, what we feel about what we are experiencing now is colored by the expectations we had before entering the movie theater, and the emotional attachment to this particular world that we have developed over time. Each new experience of the TMW is fuelled by a nostalgic desire that brings back the thrill of the first encounter, so that our very life story also becomes a part of the current experience. Interpretation, emotion, and action are thus entwined in a circular dance not dissimilar

to the hermeneutic circle in which each transmedial instantiation would add to the whole TMW universe, whose meaning gets revised and expanded with each encounter. Transmedial experiences thus transcend the individual fictions and integrate a whole network of perceptions and meanings that has been building up in the user's imagination, sometimes for many years.

How to Observe

But how to capture the transmedial experience? We propose to combine an aesthetic-analytic approach with a qualitative empirical investigation, a hybrid method which we have often used in the past (Klastrup and Tosca 2011, 2014). That is, we are interested in investigating each fiction as an individual work (what are its formal properties, how it is experienced according to the medium, what are its aesthetic qualities), and as a part of a TMW universe that gets activated by the user's imaginative interaction. It is this latter part that requires some methodological creativity, usually a combination of different qualitative approaches.

The first step is to document our own encounter with the work of fiction, which we do by systematically keeping field notes while reading/viewing and/or playing diaries (if it is a game). These notes will often be messy, including at once interpretive evaluations, gut reactions, aesthetic appraisals or musings on how the work relates to the TMW in question. Our field notes can be used both for a rigorous analysis of the work and for guiding the compilation of questions that we would like to pose to other users.

Once the work has been experienced, we are ready to produce an aesthetic/formal analysis, that will be certainly different, according to the medium and platform we are dealing with. For instance, the analysis of a novel could deal with how changes in focalization present different characters life worlds, while the analysis of a video game could show how the fighting rhythm conveys a particular meaning. Each medium has its strengths, for instance a novel excels at portraying inner

life, while a three-dimensional computer world can give an unparalleled sense of immersion. The critic shall judge each medium by its own premises, and not reject modes of expression just because they are different from whichever work that initiated the TMW. This is quite commonsensical, but still, it is surprising how many discussions about adaptation or media migration get entangled in medium-ranking battles (the book is always better than the movie), where some modes of expression are always automatically superior to others.

Once we have formed our own idea of the fictional work as an aesthetic object and how its properties actualize the TMW at hand, we are ready to reach out to other users in order to attain a wider perspective of reception. In fact, we would go as far as to arguing that without reaching to other users, a reception study remains incomplete, trapped in the individual mind of the researcher, who, no matter how insightful, can never account for a more general experience of the work. It is therefore that we always make an effort to investigate the fan communities attached to each TMW. This can involve several methods, for example, participating in discussion fora online and closely following the blogging and social media productions of fan communities, using an digital ethnography approach (Pink et al. 2015). We can also approach individual users and carry out in-depth interviews or focus groups about their media consumption experience, where the ways in which the TMW intertwine with their personal stories are explored in an open-ended way. Other methods for qualitative data elicitation can also be applied, such as asking users to narrate stories of experience as we, for example, did in order to investigate how the death of their characters was significant for players of *World of Warcraft* (Klastrup 2008). Their candid storytelling revealed many of the qualities of the TMW, which we would not have been able to grasp otherwise. In general, we consider methods of narrative inquiry (Kim 2016) to be productive when investigating TMW experiences, because it is not always easy for people to verbalize their thoughts, and the

effort of narrating an aesthetic encounter with a work (or an aspect of it) can reveal things that they themselves were not consciously aware of.

In the context of this chapter, we have played *Regency Love* as an individual work of fiction, and considered it in relation to the TMW of Jane Austen, which we know well due to our background in European Literature studies and our sustained consumption over the years of all sorts of products related to this TMW, such as films, other games, tourist tours and even merchandising related to Jane Austen. We have also located all the fans reviews and player conversations we could find online, viewed playing diary videos by fans in YouTube, as well as carefully perused the extensive materials of the *Regency Love* wiki (Tea for Three Studios 2015), where game developers and fans discuss many aspects of the fiction and the interaction in detail. Moreover, we have conducted two interviews with players of the game. All these materials will be combined in our illustration of a transmedial experience. But let us introduce the game and explain how it relates to the TMW of Jane Austen.

Case Sample: *Regency Love* and the Jane Austen TMW

Regency Love is a romance game (also known as dating sims or Otome games) for iOS devices set in the English 1800s as depicted in the novels of Jane Austen. It was launched in 2013 by the independent game developer Tea for Three, and has enjoyed continued (if niche) popularity and very positive player reviews. The player's role is that of a young woman, whose father has been dead for a year and now lives alone with her mother in the fictional English town of Darlington. Her goal is to get married to one of the eligible bachelors in the village. The gameplay is based on conversational interaction (through the choice of dialogue options) and the obtention of "motivation points" through interacting and playing small puzzle games (answering questions about the period or playing

hangman games filling in sentences). One playthrough takes a couple of hours, but the game can be replayed many times to try different suitor routes or different outcomes.

Regency Love belongs to what we can call the Jane Austen TMW. This universe, emerged from the worlds that the author conjured in her XVIII century novels, is interesting because, unlike the heavily franchised worlds of, for instance, *Game of Thrones* or *Lord of the Rings*, the stories and products adopting an “Austen-esque” mythology, ethos and topos have emerged independently of each other. *Regency Love* shares thus the TMW of other very different products like, for instance, the film *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995) or the book *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Grahame Smith and Jane Austen, 2009). In a Jane Austen TMW, place and storylines often seem to matter less than character and the central plot in an Austen-inspired story: the coming of age of a young woman, based on her social blunders and encounters with various prospective love interests/husbands. Following, what is central in the Austen universe is therefore not particular characters (though some, such as Emma or Elisabeth Bennett, remain highly recognisable, and feature in many screen adaptations of Austen’s novels), but rather their archetypal traits: a wish for independence; a strong will; good but often misdirected intentions; and the inability to recognise (at first) which man is the right for her. There are doubts, self-discovery, and usually a great deal of witty dialogue and prose. This demonstrates that a transmedial universe as mental construct can also center around archetypal characters and the particular world view (ethos) that they embody, rather than on specific narratives and specific characters.

As for other videogames in the Jane Austen TMW, there are several visual novels/Otome games, like *The Lady’s Choice* (Seraphinite, 2016) or *Northganger Abbey* (Spiral Atlas, 2016), with similar approaches to gameplay as *Regency Love*. There are also games in other genres, such as the multiplayer roleplaying game *Ever Jane* (3Turn Productions, 2013), where reputation, social status and the acquisition of property are central elements. The player advances, not by fighting, but by

participating in social events, improving selected character traits, such as “duty” or “kindness”, and building their fortune. There are even less plot-heavy genres, like the two-dimensional platform side scroller *Stride and Prejudice* (No Crusts Interactive, 2014), an endless runner where you jump over the text of the novel. However, the “get a husband/survive in society” seems to be the main motivation around which gameplay is constructed in games belonging to the Jane Austen TMW. This is hardly surprising given the social structure of the period. What is maybe more interesting is that, through their emphasis on strategic conversation, these games let players perform the constriction and uncertainty that XIX century social exchanges had for women of the English (mostly) middle class. We will later return to this important aspect.

A Transmedial Playing Experience

In this section, we will deal with the three areas described in our model above (Figure 1): the user, the world and the platform, as the transmedial experience occurs when they conflate during the reading/playing experience. Surely, it is rather artificial to separate the three factors since they are affected and constituted by each other in the experience of playing, but it is necessary for clarity.

The User: Expectations, Motivations, Desires

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1813, 1). If you have read *Pride and Prejudice*, chances are that you recognized the quote, and if you appreciated it, the words will also hold some kind of power over you. We are shameless fans of Jane Austen. For us, these are not only words. They are also the faraway thrill of opening a new black paperback, the pleasure of taking the plunge into another world far from our siblings’ squabble, the freshness of the newly cut grass, the light touch of a white summer dress, and the butterflies in our stomach as a young man we like asks us if we want

to go with him to the harvest fair. That is why we picked this game from the app store, to play in a world that we have known and loved for decades. And all these memories are with us the first time we open the game, certainly shaping the expectations we have upon what we are to encounter. We want to get immersed into a world of country houses, tea invitations, walks, candlelight and quiet gossiping. Everybody will be polite, witty and “know their place.”

Not everybody’s motivation is literary, though, as players have approached the game for other reasons as well. For example, there is a thriving community of people (mostly women), who play dating sims/Otome games, the genre which *Regency Love* could be said to belong to. For them, *Regency Love* is just a “setting” among many. As one of the players we interviewed said, “I just thought that it looked like an exciting new theme. I haven’t read Jane Austen but I have seen films from this period and have always like the dresses and the houses. I figured this has to be really romantic.” This player was later disappointed that the romance was less explicit than in the other games she is used to playing, although she acknowledged that she had been positively surprised by the quality of the writing and the dialogue options.

It is very common to play a game because someone, whose taste we trust, has recommended it. This was obvious in the online conversations about the game, where players advice each other on which aspects of the game might be appealing, or tag each other in social media thinking that this is something for someone they like: “I just LOVE it! If you’re into Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters’ literature, then you are going to love this game for sure. You have the possibility to fall in love with two totally different gentlemen and can also change the fate of those around you.”

In fact, there is a very clear social aspect to user motivation. Affective consumption is often integrated into a culture of sharing, where the affects that the user has both for the TMW and the person she wants to connect it with, come together. For instance, the other player we interviewed,

said she would try to introduce her twenty-year-old sister to the game, because she studies literature at University, so “maybe this is something we could have together.”

The World: Jane Austen Mythos, Topos and Ethos

Our game starts with a picture of a quaint village and the following sentence: “All delightful stories revolve around others, and so preoccupied you are with theirs that you do not notice stumbling upon your very own tale.” From this opening screen, the game immerses us, communicating the appropriate *worldness* through a well framed topos. Here we have the promise of an enjoyable tale, an interesting cast of characters, and a “clueless” heroine that is so attuned to everybody else’s thoughts and actions that she might not be as self-aware as it would be desirable, although we are also made to understand that this will change.

The topos is an idyllic village, hand-painted in beautiful watercolour-like shades. The women are wearing empire cut gowns in light colors, and the men are dressed in white shirts with a high collar, tailcoats and waistcoats. They are “delighted to make our acquaintance,” they “daresay” or asks us to “do them the honour of,” so the language also feels right. Our mother in the game is very keen on us improving our skills and try to find a husband, and also our late father’s friend Mr. Worthington, who instructs us very explicitly in his first visit: “My dear Miss B. I am sure you know that the way to secure happiness is by marrying a kind gentleman with the means to provide for you.” Thus, starts the real game of finding a husband.

However, and as opposed to other kind of games where player action is unambiguous (shoot all that moves), the player does not really know how to go about this. The most “gamey” element is arguably the obtention of motivation points in order to raise our character skills (riding, reading, music, dancing, drawing and needlework), but we cannot see which one is important, or even how many points are desirable, so a typical strategy is just to fill them up randomly, dividing points

equally between the skills, just to be on the safe side. The motivation points are earned by answering questions about *Regency Life*, for example about the appropriate time that a dead spouse should be mourned, or as to what clothing could be indecent, as well as playing hangman games to fill in words belonging to the Jane Austen TMW. These games and questions invariably begin to repeat themselves after a half hour of play, so it is not a very strenuous challenge to harvest many points. In a way, the questions about the proper mores of the time are a literal simulation of Regency England's ethos; while the hangman games that dwell on Jane Austen quotes bring the mythos to the foreground, as it is her works that *Regency Love* is inspired by.

From a gameplay perspective, the motivation points mechanics is of much less importance than the plot; *Regency Love* is mainly a narrative game. In accordance with the rest of the TMW, the important thing is the story unfolding before our eyes. The player spends her time going to parties, attending tea invitations, going for walks in the woods, or running errands in town; but all this is a means to the ends of getting her into conversation with the non-playing characters, both the desirable bachelors and the supporting cast.

The conversation options allow the player to mould the personality of her character very differently, as she can answer in different ways: modest, bold, witty, kind, arrogant... For example, when the dashing Mr. Ashcroft compliments her at a party: "But how terrible of me, to have neglected you. Miss Westfall, you are quite beautiful," the player has three possible answers:

- a) "Thank you. I admit to have partaken in vanity tonight"
- b) "You had almost missed your opportunity to pay such a compliment, but alas, you have made it just in time"
- c) [Looks down].

Over time, our choices will determine which character traits we develop, which in turn will have an influence in how the non-playing characters react to us and the endings that we can achieve in the

story. For example, Mr. Ashcroft will react negatively if we are “vulgar” rather than “compassionate,” while other suitors might value other traits. When playing this, we often felt constrained by the lack of immediate feedback to our actions or, worse still, by a feeling that only the most submissive of attitudes will secure us the husband. One solution is to save at different points during the game and then experiment with the kinds of answers we use in our interactions with the desired bachelors. But again in this, there is a conflict between the requirements of efficient gameplay, and the entertaining exploration of different personalities, as the following note from our playing diary can illustrate:

“I want Mr. Ashcroft, but why does it all have to be about his wimpy sister? I want to tell her to pull her act together and stop being a cry-baby but if I am nasty to her as I feel like to, he will stop liking me! I have to pretend to like her so that he likes me. I am so fake!”

One way around this, suggested by several of the fans, whose reviews we documented, might be to choose a bachelor who actually prefers us being witty and non-conventional: Mr. Curtis. Leala Turkey, in her YouTube review of the game says that he is “an aloof, grumpy, broody type (...) he doesn’t really like people or social events (...). He is kind of snobby which I think is fun” (Turkey 2015). But the player is not completely free here either. Like Leala, she is also wondering if “he will like that,” when she picks the sarcastic sentences in her dialogue options.

Ultimately, it might be about the different suitors embodying different attitudes towards romance, all of which are possible within the Jane Austen TMW, with its fair share of pretentious heroes, brooding young gentlemen, flirty officers or grumpy bachelors that turn out to be good people. In fact, perhaps the most salient characteristic of the Jane Austen TMW, as previously noted, is the strength of her archetypical characters, both the heroines and their potential suitors.

In an interview with *Regency Love* developer, Samantha Lin, she explains what the aim of the game was, and how it relates to other games: “why not have a fantasy RPG [role-playing game] with all the romance and none of the fighting? So basically, a dating sim—only, not quite, because we wanted to have all the dialogues and conversations from those RPGs we loved, as well as the ability to make an actual difference with your conversation choices” (Lien 2013). Here, she is pointing at the affordances of the medium of the videogame, where fight mechanics would appear easier to implement than love mechanics, at least if we attend to the critical mass of the medium. However, conversation can also be a worthwhile avenue to walk down in game design. *Regency Love* allows us to think of visits and balls as wartime campaigns, and social chitchat as a weapon. Indeed, the guides and walkthroughs about the game reveal the steps we must follow if we want to “conquer” a particular bachelor, as if he was a besieged city in a strategy game. The dating sims genre is also characterized by a certain degree of neuroticism, as players usually try to get all the possible “romance routes” in one single game through successive replays. This is not so much about looking for the optimal experience as about making sure that we have enjoyed all the possible worlds that the game contains, by virtue of letting us experience different love stories that let us perform multiple sides of our personality and know other characters (to some extent also archetypes), all in harmony with the TMW.

As for the abilities, we must make an effort to improve (our needlework, our dancing...), Lin is adamant: the domestic sphere can be as challenging and shape character as much as any jungle adventure. Why should women chores and pursuit be less worthy of being gamified than men’s? “A well-darned sock shows resourcefulness, skill, financial awareness and a respect for one’s belongings. So we wanted to focus on those types of stories, to allow for a kind of gentle introspection” (ibid.). This is indeed, as much in the spirit of the Jane Austen TMW as any

adaptation we have seen. A computer game can simulate and immerse, provide the illusion of inhabiting this world.

For how is it to be a young middle-class English lady in Regency England? We will never know, but a game like this can, more than any other medium, convey the difficulty of deciding to favor one suitor over another, and the maddening uncertainty of choosing the right social event and saying the right word. And it is not only about interpretation, because we feel this tension in our body, as we impatiently run through the dialogue options, frustrated at the opaqueness of all human conversation. The game ultimately and perfectly reproduces the social claustrophobia of a very small world where happiness depends on betting on the right horse, so to speak, and then being able to ride it to the finish line. As a young lady in Darlington, we are trapped, with very limited possibilities for action. We despair, spending points randomly in our skills to improve our chances without knowing how this will happen. We are afraid of speaking our own mind because that might close some possible romance route. We want to make our suitor understand that we want him, but not too clearly should our virtue be compromised. And what if we picked the wrong man? One that is gentle in the outside and turned out to be a bad husband? We will never be closer to inhabiting Mansfield Park than here.

Conclusion

We have in this chapter argued that researching transmedial experiences must combine an aesthetic/formal analysis with the qualitative investigation of user reception in order to get the full picture of the TMW experience, thus avoiding exclusive focus on the text's form or its fandom. We have proposed a transmedial experience analysis model and illustrated our holistic ambition through a case, the videogame *Regency Love*, set in the Jane Austen TMW. This is a novel addition to our

body of empirical work, as it deals with a non-franchised TMW, whose strength lies in introspection and the appeal of its archetype-characters.

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