The Xtend Story App: A Solution for Transmedia Storytelling

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By

Wade P. McComas
Bachelor of Fine Arts
Marshall University, 2010

Director: Don Starr, Associate Director
School of Art

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George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

DEDICATION

To my wife Emily, for her never ending patience, love, and inspiration. And to my daughter Faye, to show her that there are no limits where will and hard work can take her.

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ABSTRACT

THE XTEND STORY APP: A SOLUTION FOR TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Wade P. McComas M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2020

Director Chair: Don Starr

It was Christmas Day, 1993. My dad and I had been talking about it for a month and the day was finally here. *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* had finally come to theatres. I was a huge fan of its predecessor television series *Batman: The Animated Series*, so I was doubly excited to see it on the big screen.

I'd seen the trailers multiple times as they played during my cartoons, and I'd studied the ads in my comics for what felt like an eternity. All of the waiting eventually paid off. The movie received great reviews, was successful at the box office, and most importantly, my dad and I loved it.

I remember the familiarity the movie created because the animation style and all of the voice actors were the same from the TV series; it immediately felt right. No context was needed. No backstory. I knew everything that I needed to know because I'd seen every episode of the show.

Little did I realize that this was my first real experience of transmedia storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Whether most know it or not, transmedia storytelling is already part of our world. When a radio station tells you to go to its website to learn more about a story, or when a newspaper article links to another story about a similar topic, a small fragment of transmedia storytelling is happening. Only in the last 30 years have we seen it being used more in giant movie franchises and pop culture, but we still have a long way to go. Something that has always bothered me about these vast movie franchises is how they fail to inform the audience about what content is available. An example is the seventh installment in the *Star Wars* movie franchise *The Force Awakens*, which begins the latest trilogy in the series. In the movie, we're reintroduced to C-3PO, the only character to appear in all but one of the *Star Wars* films. In *The Force Awakens*, the gold-plated robot is shown on screen for the first time with a red arm. In all the previous movies up to this point, his entire body is gold. While his new red arm is noted in a moment of dialogue during the film, there is no other explanation as to why this change has been made to a very popular main character.

Star Wars is often lauded for its expanded universe plots and stories that are loved and known by die-hard fans, but to the average viewer, this extra content and the explanations that come with it remains in obscurity.

The backstory about C-3PO's red arm eventually was explained in a one-off comic half a year after the movie was released, but it had little fan-fare and no advertising to the non-comic book reading audience. It did lead to hundreds of blogs and videos celebrating the reveal, but with a release six months after the film, it had very little to no impact on the mainstream audience. Instead of hoping that audiences find these carefully-crafted backstories and subplots, *Star Wars* should release information like this right before or during a movie's release to create a larger impact on the average viewer.

WHAT IS TRANSMEDIA?

Robert Pratten, founder and CEO at Transmedia Storyteller Ltd., defines it as "telling a story across multiple platforms and doing it in a way that the whole experience is greater than the sum of its parts." (The Future of Storytelling StoryMOOC)

A broader definition comes from industry leader and author, Henry Jenkins: "Transmedia storytelling represents the 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. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of a story." (Jenkins)

In short, transmedia is telling a story in multiple parts across multiple media. What properties like *Star Wars* demonstrate is how vivid and filled out a universe can be when stretched across several platforms. By stretching stories into new markets, you can buy your saga something that all creators want: staying power. By creating a longer shelf life, the *Star Wars* trilogy, which originally spanned only six years and waited almost 20 years for its next movie installment, became something greater: legendary.

In that 20-year absence from the big screen, the *Star Wars* galaxy grew past what was seen on screen through the production of books, games, TV shows, comics, toys, magazines, and much more. All made possible by a good story, living past one medium.

PURPOSE

While expanding worlds and creating a consistent voice across channels is the primary goal of transmedia, there is one aspect that is often overlooked and, I believe, holds similar importance. Mohanbir S. Sawhney, clinical professor of marketing at Northwestern University, summarizes this point well: "The idea is to create a coordinated story experience, or transmedia storytelling, in which each medium or channel plays a specialized role and does what it does best. This approach requires its own lenses and mental models. With transmedia, one overall story is orchestrated in multiple media, each telling a part of the story. This coordinated, unified story experience encourages customers to go deeper into the story as they are drawn into the experience over a multitude of channels used to create a holistic story world." (Kellogg)

Every story is not meant to be contained in film, or text, or a bubble gum wrapper. Different aspects of stories perform best in other media. The continual popularity of converting books to movies demonstrates just how much is lost in the translation of text to film. For good reason, the on-going joke has been "The movie was good, but the book was better." Ask any Harry Potter, Hunger Games, or Jack Ryan fan which they prefer and they will most certainly choose the story in book form.

There seems to be a kind of language barrier happening that allows some aspects of a story to transfer seamlessly into other media, but stumble in others. This is the problem with containing one property to one medium: one size does not fit all. (Doll)

Put another way, all content for a certain property shouldn't just be contained to one medium, like movies, when other mediums have the potential and the ability to tell that story in a better way. Each medium should be used to its fullest potential.

In a recent interview, Ira Rubenstein, vice president of digital marketing at PBS, says "When you're confined to one platform, you're being confined to the best format that works on that platform. When you take a one-platform approach, you're limiting how you can tell that story and you're limiting how you might market that story." (Rubenstein)

It is important to note that transmedia can, and more often than not should be more than a retelling of the original story on similar properties, but expand and grow upon a story using different mediums. Intertextuality allows for the unique opportunity to link the immediate text or story to others that are noted throughout the current medium. (Freeman 24).

The movie industry has trained us to think of any content that is associated with a prior movie or property as a prequel or sequel. However, sequels continue the story of the series protagonist and the secondary characters while prequels are a reverse chronological extension (Freeman 25). Simply put, the sequels build backstory about the character from the primary franchise and prequels expand back from there. While this is good for film-world building, not crossing platforms limits the overall story-telling ability.

Freeman distills transmedia even further: "…character-building and world building, at least in isolation, do not always constitute transmedia storytelling. Rather, both character-building and world-building must operate together and alongside authorship. In terms of characteristics, this three-way relationship is crucial to transmedia storytelling, be it in any historical or contemporary area. (Freeman 35)"

A great example of this relationship appears from the world-wide phenomenon *Harry Potter* franchise. J.K. Rowling wrote and published the first book in 1997 and it quickly gained popularity among not just children but adults too. Six more books followed, as well as 8 movies based on the books.

After the success of both franchises, it was only natural to expect another installment to continue the story. It was unexpected, however, when that next addition came not to print or to the movies, but to the stage. *Harry Potter: The Cursed Child* premiered in 2016 and not only provided new characters and plots, but continued stories from the previous books, without providing context. The audience was expected to have familiarity with the brand before coming to the show.

The three-way rule presented by Freeman is completed here through the character-building in the books, world-building in the movies, and the exclusive storytelling coming through Rowling's pen for all three mediums. The effort for interconnectivity and quality has not gone unnoticed either. In just over 30 years since being conceived, *Harry Potter* is worth more than $25 billion and is considered one of the most successful media franchises ever. (Meyer)

INTERACTIONS

Now more than ever, we have the ability to choose whatever products in media we want to interact with. In the 1980s there were 12 channels available on broadcast TV, the 1990s brought 55 channels, and now there are over 2,000. This isn't including outlets that did not even exist 20 years ago, like YouTube, podcasts, and social media. With so many options available, it comes to reason that if someone is interacting with your product, they want to be. (PBS)

The expansion of choice is not limited to only these mediums. Twenty years ago, streaming music was in its infancy with sites like LimeWire and Napster, which were illegal. Now, we have Spotify, Pandora, and Apple Music. The public has fully adopted this mode of entertainment with 70 million using Napster at its peak in 2000 and 220 million logged onto Spotify now. (Kopf)

At the same time, film has also found ways to build out past the traditional "big screen release" with streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. In North America alone in the year 2000, 371 films were released. Just 18 years later, that number more than doubled to 878 movies in one year. (Watson)

When Charles Dickens' installments of his novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, were first published in his weekly serial, *Master Humphrey's Clock* in 1840, the popularity for his content was unmatched. New York readers would storm the docks waiting for the

ships, which were carrying the installments, to arrive from London and would yell at the boatmen as they were coming to shore to find out who lived and died in the newest release. No matter the time period, this goes to show that when the fandom is there, if given the opportunity, people will show up for what they love. (Lin)

Dickens' works and his pioneering of serialized stories proves how big a role a specific medium and method of distribution can play in building anticipation and love for a story.

The term "cliffhanger" was coined from his works, as it was his style to finish a chapter with a main character stuck in a dire situation (Masterclass). Ending each installment in this way also increased the eagerness in his readers to read the next one. It's just as true now as it is then, people don't mind their stories broken up, as long as it's done right and they know when and where to find each new installment.

With audiences welcoming this kind of broken up storytelling, now more than ever, people should be ready to consume stories on different mediums and different formats. However, as McCloud points out, sometimes creators become focused on using one medium by itself -- to the detriment of consumers.

When talking about nonfiction and other historical content that doesn't rely purely on imagination, allowing stories to transcend multiple platforms communicates information more efficiently. As Scott McCloud brilliantly points out in his pioneering book, *Understanding Comics*: "Traditional thinking has long held that truly great works of art and literature are only possible when the two are kept at arm's length," McCloud explains, "words and pictures together are considered, at best, a diversion for the masses,

at worst a product of crass commercialism. As children, our books had pictures galore and very few words because it was easier. Then, as we grew, we were expected to graduate to books with much more text and occasional pictures and finally arrive to 'real' books – those with no pictures." (McCloud 142)

McCloud provides examples such as cave drawings, hieroglyphics, illuminated manuscripts, and etchings. We had benefited for so long by using multiple media together – pictures and words – to get a message across, but when plain text became the norm in recent times, all of a sudden pictures became taboo.

In some texts, not allowing an image to do its work creates the potential for a lack of comprehension by the reader. For example, in the case of describing a rocket ship, a picture would help the reader understand instantly what was being described rather than by just using words. By bringing back a multi-media mindset into today's mainstream media, we'll not only be more entertained, but we'll learn more and communicate better.

HISTORY

To better understand transmedia, it is good to look at its history. While modern examples are a little easier to pin down, the first emergence of the form is much more up for debate. Some go back to ancient Greece and the oral history of the mythological gods, which were told through pottery. Others go to the Bible, which was first told orally, then written down, and then used to inspire and be told through paintings, illuminated manuscripts, sculptures, comics, and movies. The Bible has so far been translated into 670 languages, which means the use of these different mediums to tell and expand on an original work have been applied to that many more people and cultures.

Matthew Freeman, author of *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling* posits that the start of true transmedia began in the late 19th Century with the works of L. Frank Baum, author of the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and a number of other books in the same universe. Baum helped develop a huge following for his vivid fantasy stories about a faraway land by using transmedia to build anticipation for new titles. The author accomplished this by arranging window dressings to show what some of the settings in the book would look like. This created a physical manifestation of the lands and places in the book that up until that point only existed in people's imagination.

Baum also used more nontraditional ways of working with a playwright, newspaper publisher, and promoter to bring more attention to his books. Using a

combination of all these different mediums allowed Baum to create new levels of hype for his books and imaginary universe.

While Baum's expansion into other media serves as a great starting point, there are a few later examples that move the use of transmedia into modern times.

The Blair Witch Project is one. The low-budget $60,000 independent film managed to create a large following a full year before it was released in 1999. By the end of its box office run, the picture raked in $248 million, becoming one of the most successful independent films of its time (Kring-Schreifels). Though the movie is fiction, the marketing content never led people to believe that. Leading up to the release of the film, a website was created to house heavily-curated tales and "new stories" building upon the Blair Witch legend. In the following months, SyFy aired a series chronicling more of the phenomena with a faux documentary. After the film debuted, a comic book capturing more stories was published. (Jenkins 103)

Probably the most widely agreed successful example of transmedia comes from another 1999 movie franchise, *The Matrix. The Matrix* was such a complex idea that it almost required the use of transmedia for the audience to be able to fully comprehend the experience. As Freeman told me, "with *The Matrix*, both critics and fans complained that individual components of the world were too difficult to understand, or rather didn't make sense without the other components. That can be quite alienating for audiences." (Freeman Interview). However, by using transmedia in three feature films, three video games, an online animated series, and two comic book titles over the course of a decade (Emmerson), *The Matrix* trilogy overcame these challenges with a current gross of $1.6

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billion at the movies, and another installment planned for Spring of 2020. (thenumbers.com)

In 1966, a new series premiered on NBC called, *Star Trek*, which chronicles each of the missions taken by the crew of the starship USS Enterprise as they explore the galaxy in new adventures every week. Over its three seasons, the show sent shockwaves across the world that would eventually make it an icon. Since then, there have been six other iterations of the TV show, 13 movies, two animated TV shows, an estimated 860 books, and countless video games. (startrek.com)

Star Trek shows us how transmedia can keep a universe alive and thriving across decades, even during periods when it's not on screen. The plethora of TV shows and movies allows for each subsequent generation to have their *Star Trek* crew. Each to have their most vilified alien species. But at the same time, having all this connected content based off of one universe creates an urge for many to go back and experience the content from previous generations.

In his book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Meet*, Henry Jenkins defines what success looks like: "A good transmedia franchise works to attract multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media. If there is, however, enough to sustain those different constituencies – and if each work offers fresh experiences – then you can count on a crossover market that will expand the potential gross." (Jenkins 98)

Marvel Studios is of course to be recognized for its work and success in creating its cinematic universe of 24 films and nine shows. By connecting all of the properties so

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well, audiences were inclined to go see any new release, even if they were not interested in a specific installment, out of the fear of missing something leading up to the big finale. While the TV shows were not as coordinated with the movies, the name drops and references to what was happening in the movies were enough to keep fans interested.

As all of the Marvel films were based on existing comic book characters and plots, both readers and viewers are rewarded. Readers get the satisfaction of seeing their favorite characters brought to life onscreen and viewers get to enjoy new and fresh content that is years of individual comics distilled into film. The relationship between these two mediums alone, even if basic, encourages interaction with the other. A new viewer may enjoy the latest *Iron Man* movie enough to read old comics and then be treated to over 50 years worth of stories about that character and universe.

The 1980s sensation *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is one of the biggest properties to reap the benefits of transmedia. Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird created the characters as a joke and printed 3,000 copies of their quartet's first story. Within three years, Eastman and Laird's turtles would take animated TV by storm, lasting for 10 seasons. To compliment the series, an extensive toy line was produced that proved to be as successful as the show. In an attempt to capture big-screen viewers, a movie was produced that ended up being the most successful independent film of its time. (Netflix)

The rapid success of the heroes-in-a-half-shell demonstrates that if a product resonates with the public, they'll want more content. More precisely, they want more content immediately. In our modern social media, screen, and camera-filled world, we want instant pay off. The time of fans waiting three years for the sequel to arrive is

behind us. Brands that are producing multimedia need to be prepared for an encore after their prime releases. More than that though, they need to be prepared to lead the audiences to that next piece of content.

All of these examples succeed in using transmedia to expand a story's universe and keep people interacting with the properties longer.

DROPPING IN

The most common thread in all of the previous examples is the lack of guidance to help the audience find each expanded story and different medium. How are fans supposed to find these vast resources if they don't know they exist or aren't properly told where they are. This is even more necessary to do for casual purveyors of stories.

For example, what keeps many people from reading comic books is because they're intimidated about how to even begin following a title. The two biggest publishers, DC (DCcomics.com) and Marvel (Marvel.com) have 78 and 43 titles respectively. With various storylines for each character, it's understandable why some people feel uncertain about how to start reading. (Variant Comics)

Even after the unprecedented success of the *Avengers:Endgame* film, which brought in over $2.5 billion, the comic industry failed to see any substantial number of viewers make the transfer over from consuming the content onscreen to consuming it via the original comics (the-numbers.com). In March 2019, one month before *Endgame* was released in theaters, the main *Avengers* comic sold approximately 47,345 units. The next month, sales jumped to 55,244, which while impressive, did not last. Sales dipped to 49,344 in May and 46,732 by June (comichron.com).

It should not be difficult for fans to drop into a new part of a story on a different, less traditional medium after interacting with a property via movies, television, or books.

The general public want to interact with the property, but often get discouraged, confused, or just plain forget when a clear path to the next step isn't presented.

Pierre Lévy, multi-media author, summed up the aim of transmedia well: "Our primary goal should be to prevent closure from occurring too quickly." (Jenkins 97)

A more recent example of an industry failing to meet customer needs, particularly amid the COVID-19 crisis, comes from a recent interview with Todd McFarlane. Todd is the creator of the groundbreaking comic series, *Spawn* and is president of Image Comics, North America's largest independent comics publisher. "No new comics are coming out. That's a really dangerous situation – not just for us but for any consumer industry that relies on established customer habits. If you give your customer a chance to break their habit, they might not come back." (Salkowitz)

While outside forces contributed to the fallout-like situation for the comic industry, comic publishers are acting as though their characters and titles only have one method of circulation. Fans need and want new content. If an industry isn't fulfilling that desire, eventually fans will fall out of the loop. The same principle can be applied to all media. So, directing people to content outside their regular circles seems like the best option.

As Jenkins wrote: "Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. Redundancy burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail. Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the

franchise and sustains customer loyalty." (Jenkins 98)

One thing that comic books have used successfully to push readers to other titles and stories comes from their subtle text balloons with a message from the editor. Any time a comic mentions something happening outside of the issue, a note would be present from the editor to send the reader to the new comic where that event happened.

Furthermore, past comic books were unique in how they brought readers together at the end of every issue with "Letters to the Editor." These last few pages of every issue served as a pre-internet chatroom and allowed readers to share ideas, theories, and of course, to complain.
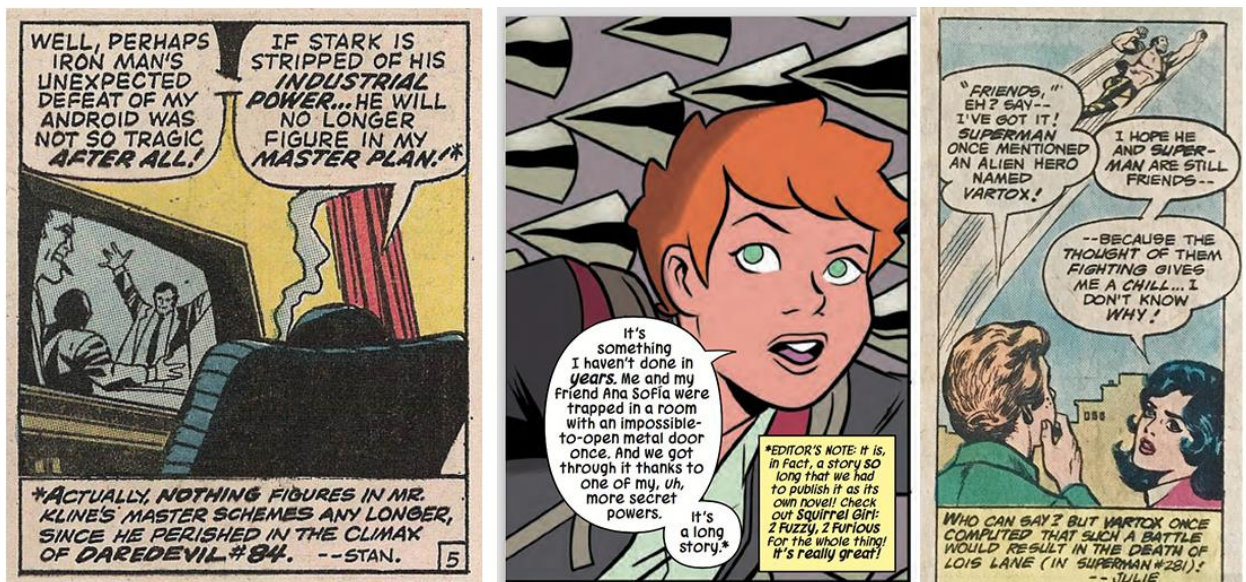

Figure 1 Various Notes From the Editor in Comic Books (Friedrich, North, Bates)

EVOLUTION OF STORY AND FANDOM

The digital age has allowed fans to expand their knowledge, own more merchandise, and grow their love of a chosen brand by making so much content only a click away. This surge in fandom has proven to be rewarding, but depends upon the merchandise and content being available to meet the needs of eager fans.

"Reading a book today can be as simple as clicking the 'Buy' in the Kindle app. As fans need less energy to acquire and experience fan objects, they have more energy to spend on finding new ways to express their love for them. They have responded to this extra time by doubling down of supplemental activities." (Fraade-Blaner and Glazer, 11)

These supplemental activities can range from anything connected to the universe of their choosing, including binge watching a TV series to buying a Lego set based off the movie. In short, wherever the property lands, the consumer is oriented and informed enough to immediately enjoy it.

Another result of well-connected stories being made readily available is the ability to tell better stories. By eliminating the expository dialogue and lead in at the beginning of stories, followers are able to immediately continue from where they left off, without having to drudge through all the information they already know. By creating better stories, companies are rewarded with new revenue from existing fans and from those who normally wouldn't have interacted with the brand previously. Fans are then

satisfied with more content that scratches the itch of their fandom a little more.

Fan-created content has also proven to be instrumental in the expansion and even creation of fictional worlds. While a lot of the stories told may not be considered "canon" to the publisher-produced stories, fandom's ability to regularly produce new content is invaluable to the brand.

In 1968, when *Star Trek* was still a relatively obscure show, it managed to create a following with the science-fiction community. A few die-hard fans went as far as to create original zines (a small, low circulation, fan-created magazine) for the show. The zine, *Spockanalia* featured original Stark Trek themed art, short stories, poems, and commentary by fans. Though *Spockanalia* only had five issues over three years, the creator of *Star Trek* called it "required reading." (Jose and Tenuto)

Though their content is outside the publisher-ordained material, fans can be relied on to create content that is worth being consumed and adds value to the story for brands and their audiences.

PRE-PLANNING

Of course, one of the biggest hurdles for any transmedia property or story has been and will always be the amount of coordination and preplanning required. The goal should not be for a movie to come out and, if successful enough, have a game and/or comic book come out the following year. While this strategy does expand the world, it doesn't take advantage of putting out content at the time that fans are most ready or interested in consuming it. Ideally, all assets will be conceived and designed at the same time.

As Danny Bilson, vice president of intellectual property development at Electronic Arts, explains: "Going forward, people are going to want to go deeper into stuff they care about rather than sampling a lot of stuff. If there's something I love, I want it to be bigger than just those two hours in the movie theater or a one-hour-a-week experience on TV. I want a deepening of the universe. I want to participate in it. I've been introduced to the world in the film and I want to get there, explore it. You need that connection to the world to make participation exciting." (Jenkins 108)

Companies that want to succeed in the new transmedia landscape, or even in the ever-changing online world in general, will need to evolve too. Transmedia encourages those interacting with the content to delve deeper than basic depths found in first interactions. Ideally, fans would "go deeper into the story as they are drawn into the

experience over a multitude of channels used to create a holistic story world." (Sawhney)

These depths will only be reached by ensuring the worlds introduced to audiences are

ready to be found and are extensively explored.

When *Star Wars* broke onto the scene in 1977, it totally changed the film genre, but more importantly, it broke ground for new transmedia storytelling. After its record-breaking run at the box office, fans were left wanting more and the creators were ready to deliver. *Star Wars* creators created a whole new market by producing merchandise, most notably toys, to accompany the movies. From the main hero to the random robot in the background, eventually every character had a toy and, more importantly, a backstory.

In 1978, only a year after the film's release, Lucas Film, the production company of *Star Wars*, started producing *The Official Star Wars Fan Newsletter*, later renamed as *Bantha Tracks*. This quarterly publication pointed fans to new comics that would soon be available, included updates about the next movie, helped you find other fans in your area, and previewed new merchandise. Lucas Film would go on to make books, video games, multiple television programs, and many more expressions of media, all in the same universe, influencing each other.

As described in the book *Superfandom*: "When fans of the *Star Wars* franchise have finished binge-watching, they have dozens of other points of access: books, toys, comics, fan-conventions, drawings, amusement-park rides, video games, and costume contests. It's not just a set of movies meant to be viewed and perhaps later viewed again. This is a world in which audience members can become fully immersed, one that they

can make their own." (Fraade-Blaner and Glazer, 11)

Star Wars is also revolutionary in how it treats participating audiences as fans, not purveyors. All of the main movies begin with a text crawl that, while filled with new information to explain the story and setting, doesn't overwhelm viewers with "you should watch/read this before seeing this movie" information. It is simply self contained that can be expanded upon in other products..

TRANSMEDIA MARKETING

While world building through marketing is its own form of transmedia, it tends to lead up to a certain release and then stop. These campaigns are great for setting the tone of a movie, book, or show, but they're only serving that one piece of content, and not the entirety of the universe. As mentioned earlier by Robert Pratten, founder and CEO at Transmedia Storyteller Ltd., with transmedia, the whole should be greater than the sum of its parts.

Not everything with images or characters related to a brand are considered transmedia, as some manifestations are simply marketing. Lunch boxes, book bags, slippers, birthday balloons and so on do not need to participate with telling a story. What they can do is keep a transmedia brand active in the public's mind. It's hard to forget Spider-man when he's on every shirt, bike, and toy commercial.

The marketing campaign of the 2008 blockbuster *The Dark Knight* serves as a great example of content outside of the movie adding depth to the product. Fifteen months before the movie was released, Warner Brothers began the campaign. In the end, it captured over 11 million people across 70 countries to participate.

Gary Rosen, one of the creative leads on the campaign describes just some of the events: "The campaign spilled over into the real world as fans called phone numbers written in the sky, found phones the Joker left for them inside birthday cakes, and helped

project the Batman signal on buildings in New York City and Chicago… everything

came out of one mission – to bring people into the world of Gotham City. To make

Gotham City real." (Rosen)

A smaller example of using transmedia comes from the hit 2006 Showtime series

Dexter. The show chronicles the life of Dexter, a blood-splattered analyst for the Miami

police who moonlights as a serial killer whose victims are criminals. In a season two

episode, a murder takes place in a comic book store. The episode includes various

homages and tips-of-the-hat to the tradition of reading comics and the worlds they

contain. Jokes about people disappearing like Clark Kent, references to mutants, and

various mentions of Batman are just a few examples of the Easter eggs that comic readers

enjoyed in the episode.

The respect paid to the comic industry caught the attention of numerous fans. This

led to a new comic book series and other new comic-inspired content. The new comic led

to new viewers, expanded licensing opportunities, and of course, new revenue. (Zeiser)

THE XTEND STORY BRANDING

While many of the prior examples serve as impressive cases of how to push a property across multiple titles, few integrate their corresponding "universes." Furthermore, they fail to lead consumers to products linked to what they are immediately interacting with.

Consumers cannot successfully interact with products they don't know about. This is the main purpose of advertising: awareness. Making associated titles and products available to an audience takes the footwork away and encourages them to continue with characters they are already familiar with.

Not only does transmedia create more chances for interacting with new products, but it opens the story possibilities as well. By seamlessly flowing from one product to another, the storytellers no longer have to deal with endless exposition and can enter a new story straightaway. By creating a seamless flow, partakers are allowed to interact with and feel more a part of the world they're "in."

One of the main issues of telling stories across different media is locating or acquiring them. This is where the Xtend Story app comes in. The Xtend Story app will serve as a depot or way-finding tool for any transmedia story that participates. If the story begins with a major motion picture, that content will push users to the app, which will show them the next part or parts of the story.

To make the process work to find related content outside of the app, users will be encouraged to use the scan function in the app. Every piece of print content that is part of the story or universe will have the Xtend logo and a unique code. The logo will act as a QR code, similar to the ones currently being used by Instagram for nametags. When encountering print elements in the environment, whether it be a poster, book, or comic, the scan feature will identify that content, thereby removing tedious work of people finding it themselves.

**Figure 2 Xtend Story App Scanning Function on a Participant Poster**

Figure 3 Xtend Story App Magazine Ad With Scannable Logo

For participating digital properties, the logo will link directly to the asset page on the app. For those who choose not to download the app, the content will still be available, but only as a preview. To get full use of any titles in the app library, an account will be required. The more extensive elements, such as comics or a game, will require purchase. In instances when the logo is not linked to a page or when someone finds the page organically, a search function will be present.

If someone starts with a comic that is the third chapter, the app will point them to the chapters prior to that, so that they can move forward with all of the information.

The app will eliminate uncertainty and guessing on behalf of casual fans to help them find new content and provide a direct path to fandom.

The Logo
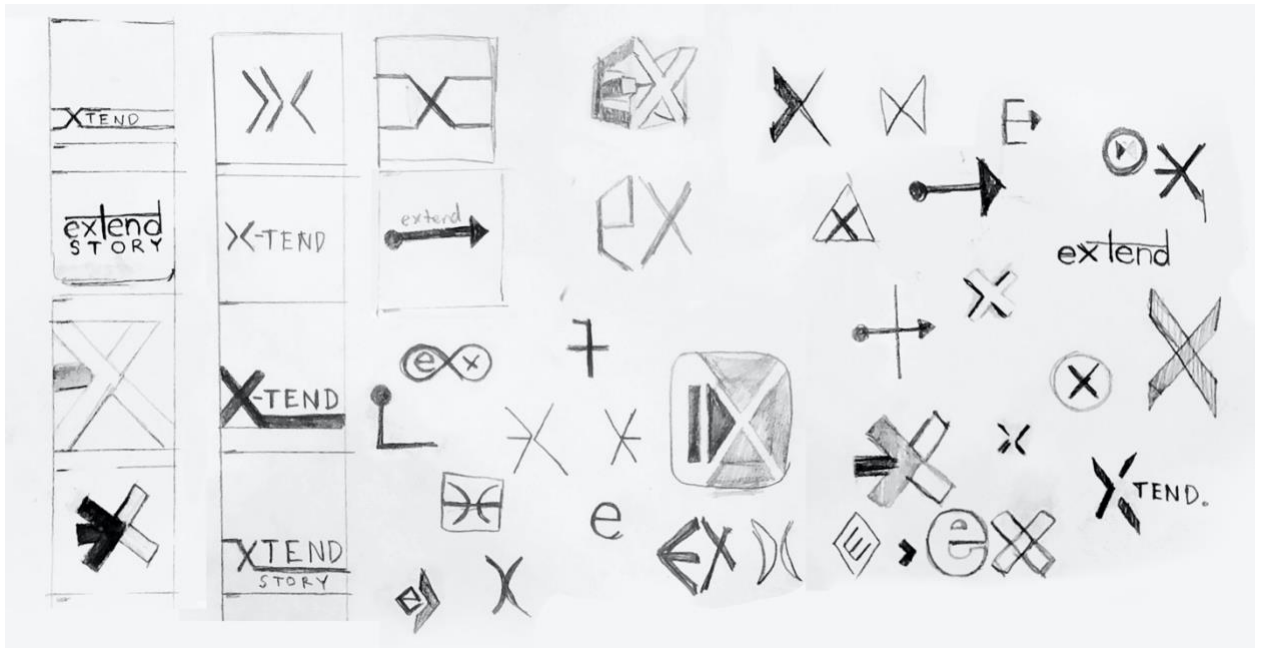
Figure 4 Xtend Story Logo Concepts

I wanted the logo to be a strong, simple mark with the expectation that it would be predominantly, but not exclusively, used in a digital setting. By ensuring its simplicity and the heavy line weight, the logo is more likely to hold up at the smallest of sizes.

It is important that the logo be memorable for brand recognition. Users will obviously be pushed to the app as much as possible, but when they see the logo, they

need to know what it means. If it is already on their phone, they need to remember that it is there and not treat it as wallpaper.

Figure 5 Xtend Story Logo Orientations

Xtend logo contains an X, forward arrow, play button, a crossroads symbol, and a hidden "EX".

With 90 percent of Americans having cellphones, the media landscape has begun shifting to a mobile-first mindset (Vaynerchuk). *Quibi.com*, for example, offers shows and movies that are specifically formatted for mobile viewing. Media companies already have most of their brands available online, but scattered across the web. The free Xtend Story app will be the depot for most, if not all of the media associated with any of the participating titles.
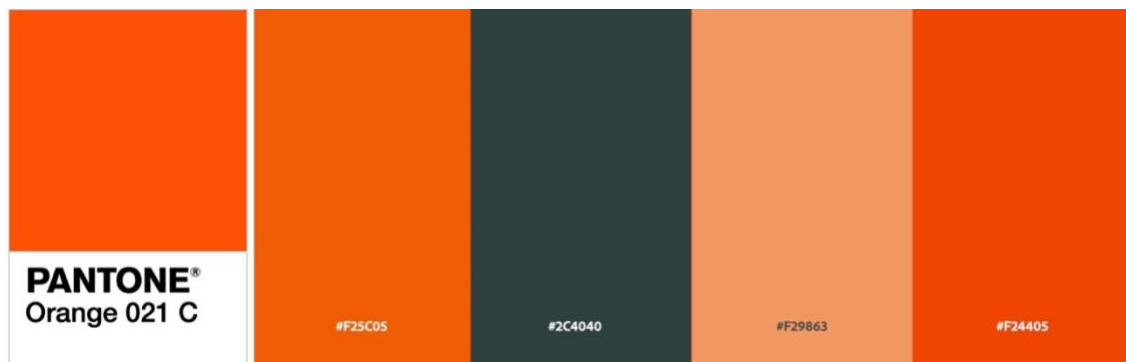
Color Palette

Due to the primary digital nature of the Xtend Story app, it is important that the color palette stand out onscreen. Many colors have already been taken by competing

content services. To name a few: Netflix (red), Hulu (green), Amazon Prime (blue), Sling (blue), and Disney Plus (blue). Those examples are from the services' video-based apps.

Warm colors provide a sense of movement and energy, which is the feeling I want to evoke. Red is "spoken" for by too many other media companies, yellow is often too vibrant, and brown lacks the dynamism a brand needs to provide. To be effective, I decided to build the Xtend Story app around the color orange.

As the graphic design publisher *Smashing Magazine* described the color orange in an extensive article on color theory: "In its muted forms it can be associated with the earth and with autumn. Because of its association with the changing seasons, orange can represent change and movement in general. Orange is also strongly associated with creativity. In designs, orange commands attention without being as overpowering as red. It's often considered more friendly and inviting, and less in-your-face." (Chapman)

The traits of change and creativity are a lot of what Xtend represents. Maintaining a strong foothold in the digital space through color choice is also key in the saturated media market that we currently live in.

Figure 6 Xtend Story Color Palette

Typeface

I wanted to use a typeface that had a diverse family, held up at smaller sizes, and had some familiarity mixed with individuality. While a serif typeface would bring a certain amount of credibility, sans-serif typefaces have proven over and over to hold together better in an online setting. Xtend must read as a digital-first initiative that can show up in the print world and not the other way around so as to better push people to the app.

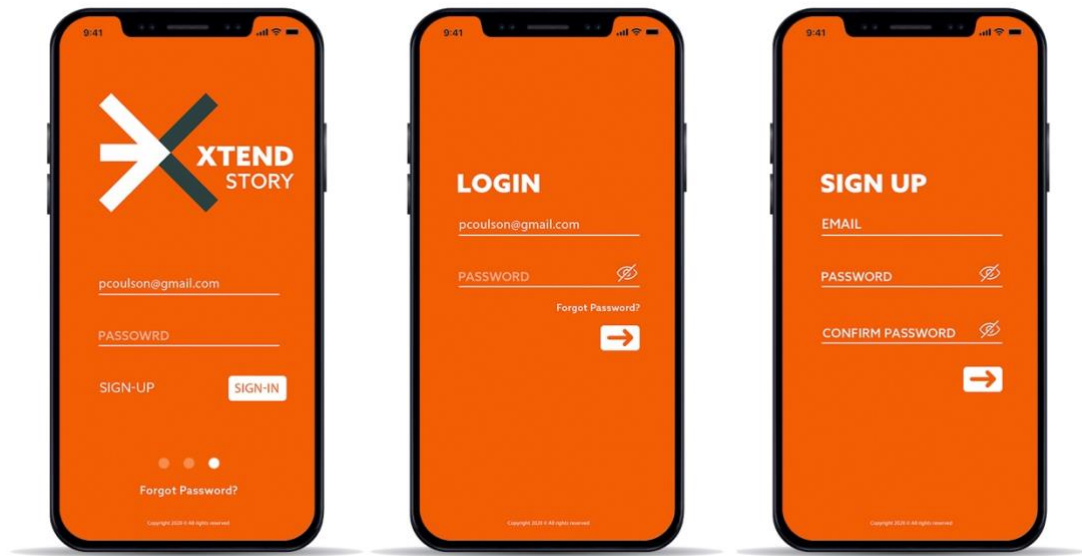For these reasons, I decided to use Azo Sans.

Figure 7 Azo Sans Typeface Family

Figure 8 Xtend Icons and Lockups

Figure 9 Xtend Login Screen

I wanted the app design to be focused and clean to lessen any confusion by the user, especially since the app provides a more unique experience than that of more traditional entertainment apps.

When interacting with a profile page, which users are led to after choosing a property, everything is built to guide the fan to the correct next destination. For example, if they've begun halfway through a story, the app will advise them to start with the prior entries to make sure they are entirely up to date before moving on.
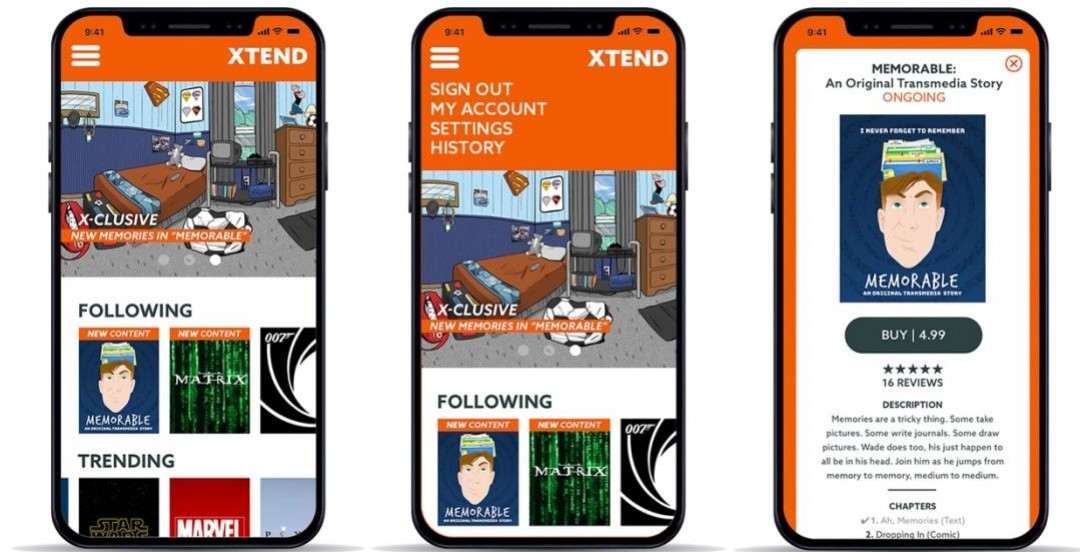
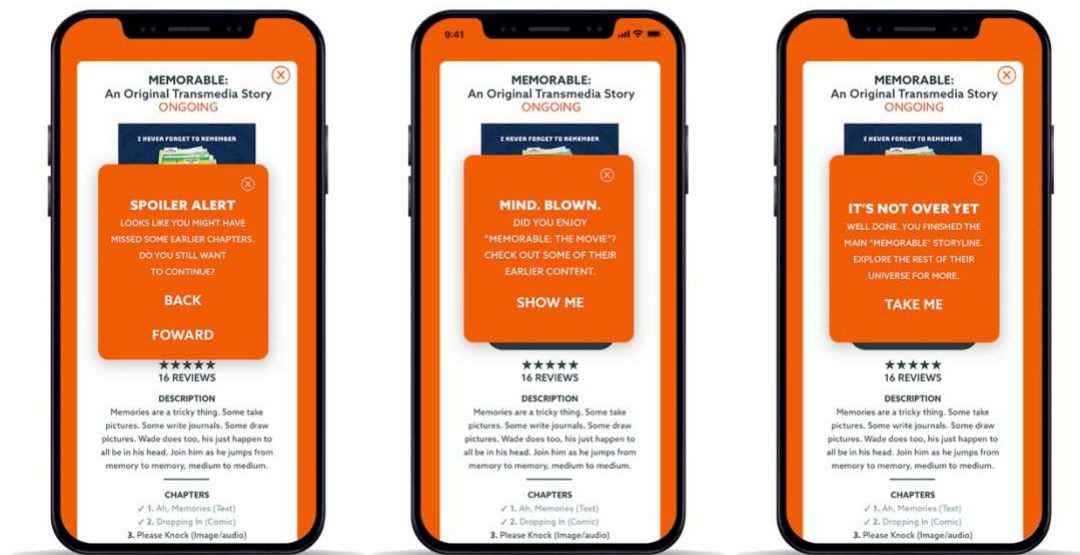**Figure 10 Xtend Home Screen and Profile Page**

Figure 11 Xtend Content Notices

MEMORABLE: WHAT MODERN TRANSMEDIA COULD LOOK LIKE

To best demonstrate what a transmedia story could look like, I wrote and designed a short story. Though each installment is just a small representation of the potential, it shows how easily that multiple stories, with a little planning, could blend together to become one big narrative.

Memorable: An Original Transmedia Story is a story about me and my immersive memories. Each installment takes the viewer from one recollection to another, flowing from one medium to the next. The media used is text, comics, interactive image, video, music, and a podcast.

An extra incentive for marketing professionals to use the Xtend app is the interactive image. As an example of how it could work, in *Memorable: An Original Transmedia Story*, the viewer makes their way through the panorama of my childhood room, with links appearing on certain items leading to online products.

Another example from my story that could be used as a marketing tactic in the app is a featured playlist. At one point, I stumble across on old mix CD. While most of the songs will be available for listening, links will take listeners to platforms where the music is available for purchase.
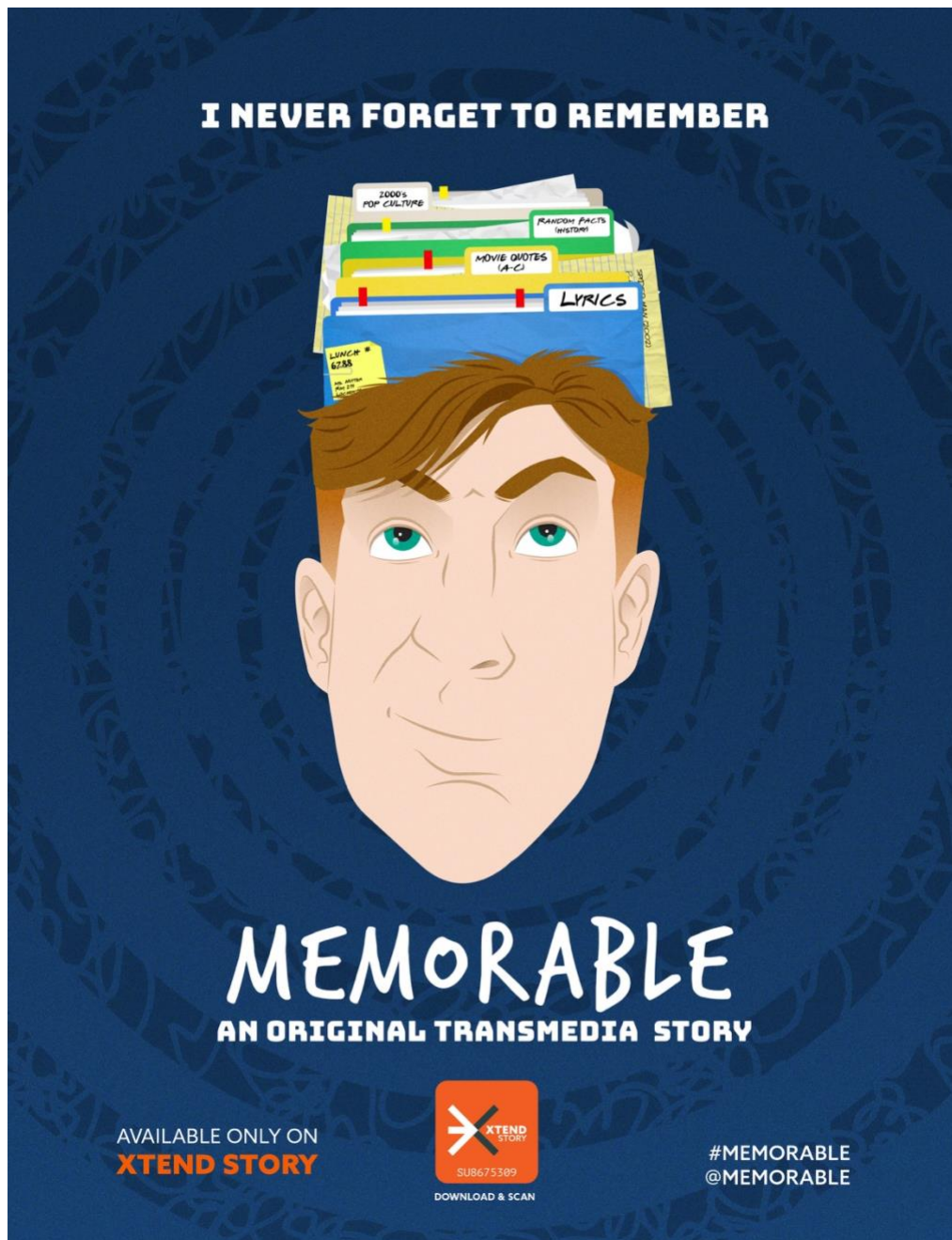
Figure 12 *Memorable* **Key Art**

A few years ago, I was at a party. Actually, this was a more casual meeting of friends after church.

At some point, I wandered into a conversation between a friend and a fancy doctor (psychology I believe). They were talking about how my friend manages not to take notes during meetings. I shared about how I don't take notes, but if I draw, I'll remember everything that was said.

"You must have a very active episodic memory," said the doctor.

"Sure! … What's that?"

According to the psychologist, everyone has episodic memories, but some people's brains, like mine, rely on this memory type more than others.

"Have you ever seen *Back to the Future*?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Tell me what happens, scene-wise, from the beginning."

I began. She stopped me at the part when Doc talks about 1.21 gigawatts in the Twin Pines Mall parking lot.

"Yeah, see you have an episodic memory. You're a visual learner. Judging by how you just retraced *Back to the Future* one scene at a time, you have a very ACTIVE episodic memory."

"Sooo…."

"So, when you're remembering all of this stuff, your brain is reconstructing everything based on various cues from your senses. You remember things in order so well because your brain is following the breadcrumbs of the things happening around you. Most

people remember the instance, you're remembering the whole reel and everything associated with it."

"Interesting."

"It means that when you remember a memory, you're dropping yourself back into that spot. To a degree, you're re-experiencing everything as you once did."

All of a sudden, I had a super power. I mean, I've always had it, but now, I was aware I had it.

I could drop myself back into memories like some kind of Christopher Nolan movie.

Obviously, I wouldn't be dropped into the "past" for every memory, but for the stuff that did have data attached to it, it'd be pretty fun to revisit.

Even remembering that party now, I can tell you where we parked (behind Brady and Jillian), what we brought (nothing), where I sat (at the head of the table, I felt super weird about that), where the doctor sat (left) and where everyone else at the table sat.

I should note here that this type of memory is totally different than those people who are interviewed on TV because they remember EVERYTHING. All the time. Like … what was her name? She was on *Taxi*.'Weird spelling … MARILU HENNER! Weird. I never even liked 'Taxi.'

I think it's time I actually use these powers for good. Obviously, I've had these memories my whole life, but having a name for it and knowing it's unique makes it so much cooler. It's about time I went to Yoda and learned how to use my powers. So, for one day, unchained and free, let's see where my memories take me.
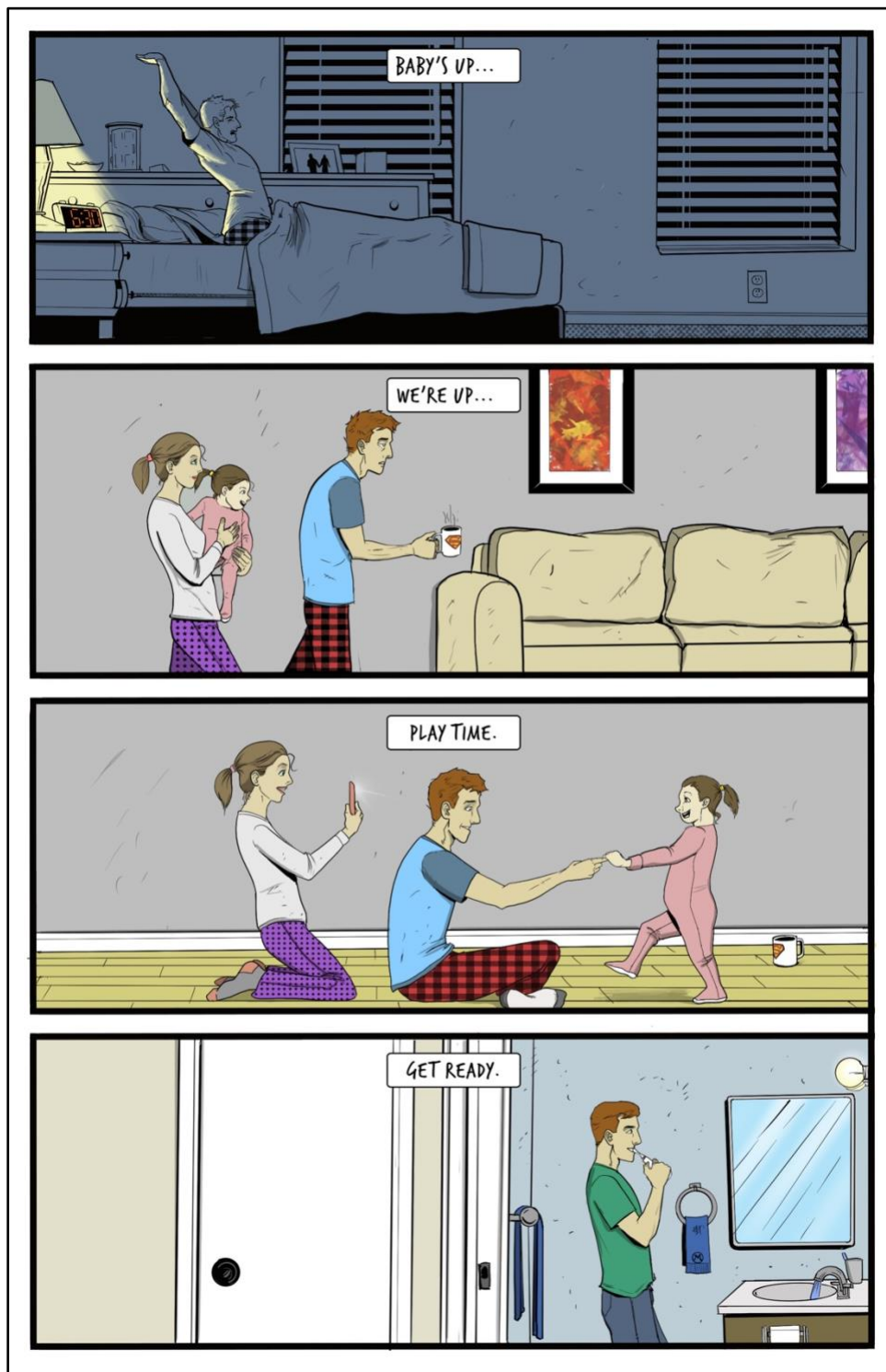
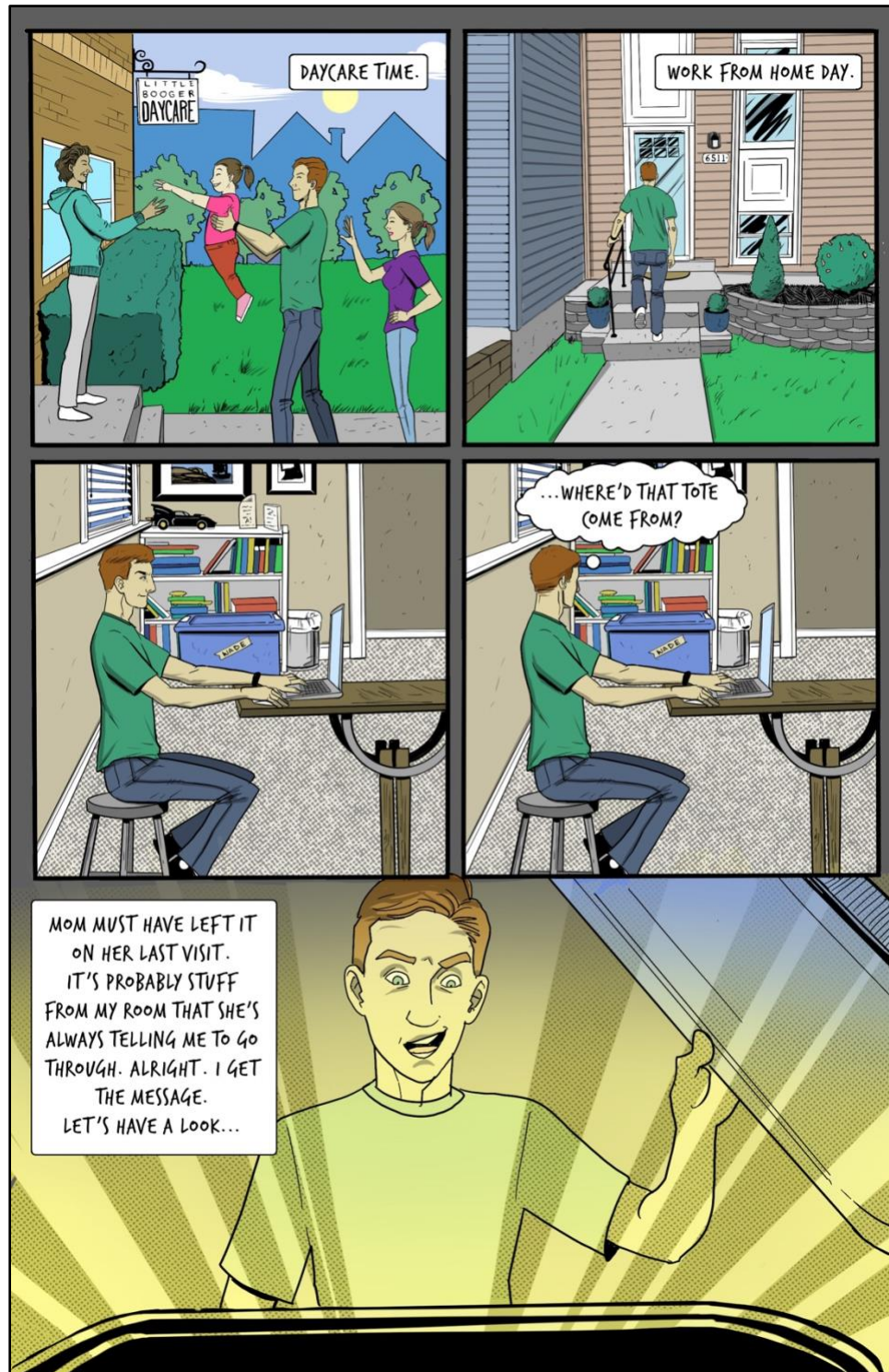**Figure 13** *Memorable* **Comic Page 1**

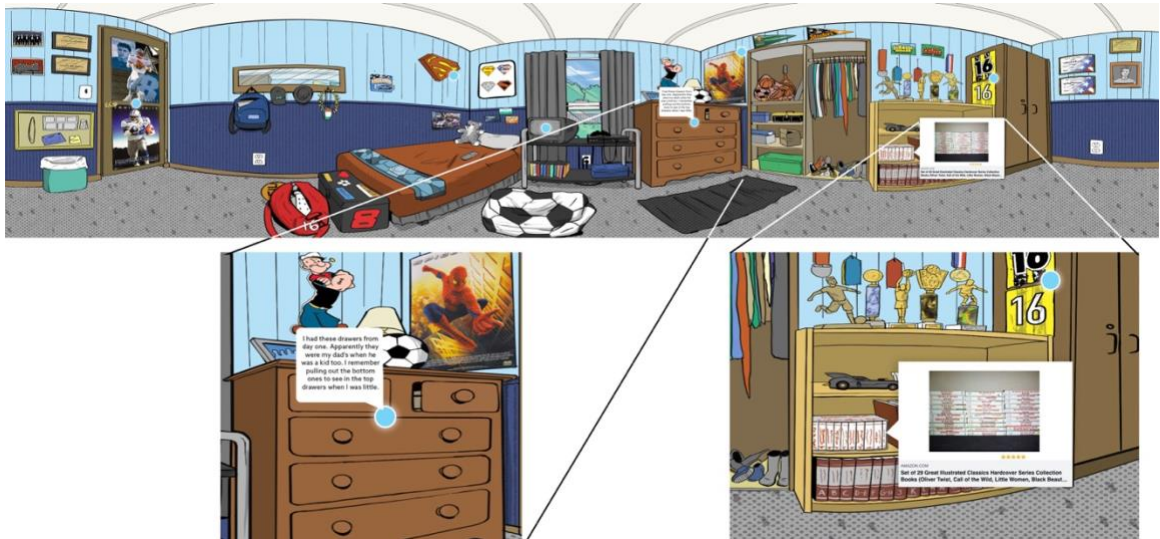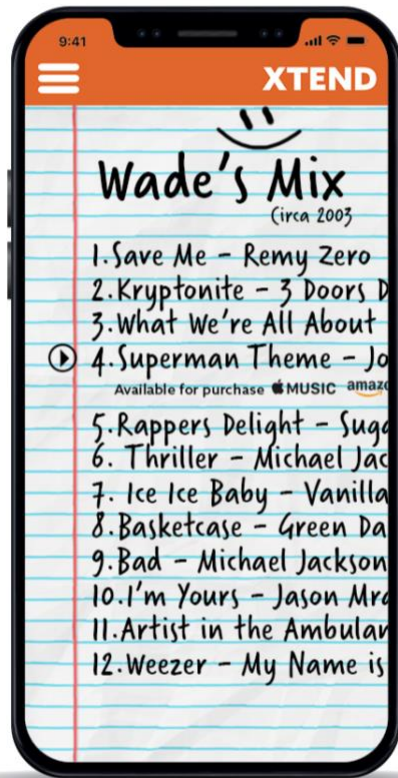**Figure 14** *Memorable* **Comic Page 2**

Figure 15 Room Panorama

Figure 16 Playlist

CONCLUSION

The media world is expanding and evolving at a rate faster than ever before. Media that did not even exist 20 years ago have become primary delivery systems of content for many around the world. With these rapid changes and shifting habits, a new mindset and process of enveloping viewers into the worlds being made by creators is possible more than ever and fans have shown they're ready to consume it.

Transmedia is not a new idea: One concept or world spread across multiple delivery systems. For example, we no longer rely just on boats for shipping cargo, or planes, or trains. They work in harmony to get the people of the world what they need and what they want. By working in harmony, the amount of content increases, boosting the opportunity for fandom and removing the exclusivity that comes with it today.

By utilizing a depot for transmedia stories, studios, publishers, and creators have the chance for their stories to be seen that much more and have them be a part of something bigger. If technology is allowing the Earth to feel smaller, then it's time we start using technology to make our worlds bigger.

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BIOGRAPHY

Wade P. McComas received his Bachelor's Degree in Advertising from Marshall University, West Virginia in 2010, where he graduated com laude. He is employed by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) where he is an Associate Art Director.

In 2020, he will obtain his Master of Fine Arts, with concentration in Graphic Design, from George Mason University. In his tenure at Mason, he has also taught Typography and Illustration.