The semiotic dimension of transmedia design

A dimensão semiótica do design transmídia

Geane Carvalho Alzamora

transmedia, semiotics, pragmatism, design

This discussion is based on the following questions: a) What are the limits and potential of transmedia design for contemporary communication planning?; b) How and to what extent can semiotics contribute to the issue? In order to answer these questions, we consider that th transmedia logic outlines the contemporary communication logic. In this sense, we emphasize the necessary articulation between communication and transmedia logic to discuss the specificities of design and semiotics in the scope of transmedia logic and its implications in various areas of knowledge. We sought to highlight the etymological approach between sign and design to elucidate the contributions of semiotics to this area of knowledge. Concomitantly, it was emphasized that transmedia logic can be better understood with the adoption of the logical perspective stemming from Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism, which identifies logic with semiotics.

transmídia, semiótica, pragmatismo, design

Essa discussão se baseia nas seguintes questões: a) Quais são os limites e potencialidades do design transmídia para o planejamento da comunicação contemporânea?; b) Como e em que medida a semiótica pode contribuir para a questão? Para responder essas questões, consideramos que a lógica transmídia delineia a lógica da comunicação contemporânea. Nesse sentido, destacamos a necessária articulação entre comunicação e lógica transmidia para discutir as especificidades do design e da semiótica no âmbito da lógica transmidia e suas implicações em diversas áreas do conhecimento. Buscamos destacar a aproximação etimológica entre signo e design para elucidar as contribuições da semiótica para essa área do conhecimento. Concomitantemente, destaca-se que a lógica transmidia pode ser mais bem compreendida com a adoção da perspectiva lógica oriunda do pragmatismo de Charles Sanders Peirce, que identifica a lógica com a semiótica.

1 Introduction

This chapter starts from the following questions: a) What are the limits and potential of transmedia design for contemporary communication planning?; b) How and to what extent can semiotics contribute to the issue?

We start from the premise that the transmedia logic (Jenkins, 2016) outlines the contemporary communicational logic (Alzamora

& Gambarato, 2014; Gambarato et al. 2019). Therefore, we emphasize the necessary articulation between communication and transmedia logic to discuss the specificities of design and semiotics in the scope of transmedia logic and its implications in various areas of knowledge.

Jenkins (2016) adopted the name transmedia logic to designate the intended interaction between consumers, producers and texts in relation to the purpose of transmedia planning[1]. According to Jenkins (2016), transmedia logic is based on the seven principles of transmedia narrative, proposed by him in 2009 and revised by him in 2010, within the scope of what he called transmedia education: potential for sharing/depth; continuity/multiplicity; immersion/extraction; construction of universes; seriality; subjectivity; performance. "These principles can be understood as semiotic modes of acting in a transmedia way in the digital environment" (Alzamora & Andrade, 2019, p. 117).

According to Jenkins (2017), transmedia logic is emphasized in its adjective dimension, which is applied to various communicative situations, such as entertainment, journalism, education and design. The adjective transmedia circumscribes how multiplatform distribution and citizen participation, driven by algorithms, affect the online/offline expansion of content in contemporary times.

But, although Jenkins (2016, 2017) underlined the logical perspective of the adjective transmedia, he did not explain what he meant by logic. We consider transmedia logic based on the logical perspective of Peircean semiotics, normative science that investigates language and its signification processes. This perspective gives relevance to the aspects of signification that derive from transmedia design and its implications in contemporary communication planning.

For Charles Sanders Peirce (1939–1914), logic, or semiotics, is based on ethics, normative science that investigates the course of action, and ethics is based on aesthetics, normative science that turns to what is admirable in itself. The three normative sciences logically regulate the course of action towards an aesthetic ideal that is admirable in itself (Peirce, 1998). For this reason, it is important to consider the ethical aspects of transmedia design, related to the creative circulation/expansion of transmedia dynamics in online/offline connections, as well as the aesthetic aspects, that is, what mobilizes attention and outlines social engagement.

2 Design, semiotics and communication

The relationship between design, semiotics and communication can be traced from the very etymology of the word design. According to Flusser (2007), the word design is of Latin origin and contains the term *signum*, which refers to sign and drawing. This reference underlines the semiotic dimension of design and its communicational capacity, since every communicational process is, first of all, a process of signification.

1 The conception is originally presented by Marsha Kinder (1991) as transmedia intertextuality.

Flusser (2017) also points out that the word design operates as a noun and as a verb. In its noun perspective, it refers to purpose, plan, intention and form. In his verbal perspective, it refers to planning, configuring, proceeding strategically, plotting something, simulating. Such perspectives are related to the sign dimension of design, whose capacity for representation has positive and negative connotations. "The word design occurs in a context of cunning and fraud. The designer is, therefore, a mischievous conspirator who is dedicated to setting traps" (Flusser, 2007, p. 182).

Ashwin (1984) reviews semiotics, the science of signs, as a possible intellectual groundwork for developing a theory of drawing. According to him, drawing as a system of signs has important cultural origins that are reflected in etymology. He stresses that the german *Zeichen*, meaning sign, gives us the verb to draw; the Italian *segno* (sign), *disegno* (drawing, design); and English *drawing* takes its form from the action of pulling, "which is characteristic of so much drawing activity, but a similar etymological link can be seen in the words sign and design" (Ashwin, 1984, p. 43).

From the explicit etymological relationship between sign and design, as presented by Flusser (2007) and Aushwin (1984), derives the understanding that design has a purpose not only to generate meaning, but also communication, since communication presupposes meaning, intention and shape. According to Salgado, Alzamora and Ziller (2019) the etymology of the term communication refers to making it common, sharing the same action, linking. Sharing presupposes bond, and bond presupposes common meanings, mastery of semiotics.

Santaella and Nöth (2005) state that semiotics, the science that investigates all types of signs and the processes of signification, has a close relationship with communication. The authors emphasize the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary[2] perspectives of communication and semiotics, as well as the constant expansion of fields derived from this relationship. The field of design can be understood as a modality of its own knowledge that expands the fields of semiotics and communication at the same time that it is expanded by both, given the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary characteristics related to their common etymological roots.

The communicational purpose of design presupposes the sharing of meanings and bonds. The contemporary logic of communication, on the other hand, presupposes the growing formation of online/offline links, favored by the multiplatform distribution of content and social participation. In this communicational dynamic, here called transmedia, the sharing of meanings grows as social participation grows and is recurrently driven by algorithms.

Thinking about the logic of transmedia communication in this light requires understanding how information expands through the integrated action of producers and consumers in digital connections. We consider that the Peircean model of semiosis can serve as a theoretical-methodological parameter for transmedia dynamics

2 The suffix trans, which both specifies the scientific nature of communication, semiotics and design, as well as the media perspective of transmedia logic, refers to possibilities for generating new and distinct content from pre-existing formats and genres. On the subject see Gambarato, Alzamora, Tárcia (2020).

(Alzamora & Gambarato, 2014) because the sign-object-interpretant relationship that constitutes it provides clues for understanding how transmedia dynamics expands meanings through habits that it involves, and how those habits tend to be improved as they generate more communicative activity. Thus, we understand semiosis as a pragmatic[3] process of uninterrupted production of meanings because it involves habits of action in continuous logical improvement (Alzamora, 2018).

The semiosis model defines constant relationships between sign, object and interpretant. In this approach, sign is a triadic entity that is established as a reference to the object that determines the sign (representamen) in aiming at producing an effect, its interpretant, which has the nature of another sign (Alzamora & Andrade, 2019).

Santaella (2001) proposes that Peircean semiotics should also be understood as a theory of communication. She takes the semiosis model, based on the sign, object and interpretant triad, as an abstract communication model relating respectively to: sign/message, object/emitter and interpretant/receiver. According to her, this correspondence unfolds in a triadic theory of objectification (sign/object), signification (sign/sign) and interpretation (sign/interpretant).

This proposition is useful to describe the communication logic associated with transmedia design because it allows us to identify how a design project (sign/signification) can be understood from the point of view of its reference (object/objectification) and its communicational purpose (interpretant / interpretation). The communicational process of the design thus involves objectification, meaning and interpretation, and these aspects are increasingly in tune with the transmedia perspective of contemporary communication.

3 Transmedia design

The transmedia approach enhances specificities of design in the contemporary context of transmedia communication, being characterized by constituting a field of studies still little explored by researchers and professionals in the field. The configuration of this incipient field of studies, notably interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, is particularly useful for enhancing purposes of multiplatform communication planning and the production of meaning in online-offline connections, although the transmedia design approach is useful in various areas of knowledge.

Take, for example, the case of design thinking, here understood as a modality of design studies. For Ribeiro (2020), the methodological procedures proposed by design thinking – inspiration, ideation and implementation – correspond to the Peircean abduction, deduction, and induction types of reasoning, which are necessary for the development of hypotheses and for the validation of solutions. He clarifies that the three stages of design thinking, or the way in which designers deal with complex scenarios to create solutions,

contemplate the necessary steps so that an investigator can not only elaborate plausible hypotheses (abduction), but also put them to the test (induction) and apply them in broader contexts (deduction).

According to Gambarato (2019), the design thinking process generally integrates phases, such as: apprehension, preparation, incubation, illumination, verification and communication. In her view, the design approach to transmedia projects implies the design thinking process behind the ideation, building, and execution of transmedia stories. "This vast domain has yet to be further explored by scholars, researchers, and practitioners alike" (Gambarato, 2019, p. 401). She stresses that a transmedia design project is a kind of analytical and synthetical model that contributes to a qualitative understanding of the design process of complex projects that unfold across multiple media platforms.

In Moloney's (2018) view, design thinking can help journalists bring the care they put into the creation of traditional single stories into the planning of a complex project constructed of many interconnected parts. He stresses that transmedia logic vary by media industry and by the researchers. In the same way, he considers that describing the concept of design thinking defies essentialist description as its characters and use changes between academics and industry, and between analysts and designers. "Despite the lack of codification, the common elements among these many views on design thinking are a valuable entry point to transmedia journalism project design" (Moloney, 2018, p. 84).

The social reach of the transmedia design approach is as wide as it is varied. Based on research carried out from online search engines on how the transmedia design approach is defined in the international scientific literature, Senz and Pereira (2016) identify different connotations in different contexts of applications. In general, according to them, the approach refers to design or project practices and processes inserted in the transmedia context.

Here, we underline the contributions of the transmedia design approach, which includes design thinking for the field of communication, especially for communicational planning in transmedia logic. Given the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary nature of communication and semiotics, the applications of the transmedia design approach in communicational planning are also wide and varied. We present below some possibilities of application, emphasizing the relevance of the contribution of other researchers in the field to expand the empirical-conceptual and theoretical-methodological perspectives of the transmedia design approach.

4 Transmedia communicational planning

Communication planning based on the transmedia design approach takes into account the specificities of transmediality, communication

and design. Considering the emphasis given here on the processes of design signification and transmedia logic, we argue that transmedia communication planning seeks, above all, to direct the production of meanings that emanates from the multiplatform distribution of content and social participation in online/offline connections. In line with the pragmatic perspective of semiotic logic, we understand that such direction of meanings, or the course of action, must be logically oriented towards an aesthetic purpose.

Gambarato (2013) proposes a transmedia design project model based on 10 original topics, which can be applied in different contexts: 1) premise and purpose; 2) narrative; 3) worldbuilding; 4) characters; 5) extensions; 6) media platforms and genres; 7) audience and Market; 8) engagement; 9) structure; 10) aesthetics. These 10 aspects of transmedia design projects "address essential features of the design process behind transmedia projects and contribute to support the analytic needs of transmedia designers and the applied research in the interest of the media industry" (Gambarato, 2013, p. 81).

Based on transmedia design project model, Gambarato and Tarcia (2017) propose transmedia design model to journalism. Gambarato; Alzamora; Tárcia (2016, 2018) and Gambarato, Alzamora, Tárcia, Jurno (2017) develop their own approach to analyze communication strategies planned to the global media events: World Cup 2014 and 2018; Winter Olympics 2014 and Summer Olympics 2016. This model was subsequently improved (Gambarato et al., 2020) to establish five main topics: 1) story; 2) premise; 3) extensions; 4) audience; and 5) structure. They consider practical questions regarding news storytelling, media platforms, and audience engagement in each case analyzed. "News coverage of planned events can vary in all dimensions, including the size of the news company involved, the technological apparatus, the number and variety of professionals, and the strategies behind it" (Gambarato et al., 2020, p. 125).

Gambarato, Alzamora, and Tárcia (2020) also analyzed their own communication strategies in transmedia education based on this transmedia design project model. The transmedia educommunication project was developed for low-income communities, such as East Timor, Mozambique and Brazil[4], use multitude of platforms, especially analogical, to promote an active instance in the classroom. "This variety of tools shapes the social agenda and reaches stakeholders through incentives to participate. Cultural behavior shapes the creative use of media platforms and change in behavior is achieved through social engagement" (Gambarato et al., 2020, p. 143). The methodology covers five complementary steps: (1) diagnosis, (2) planning, (3) product development, (4) execution of planned actions, and (5) evaluation of the results achieved.

In the proposed methodology, Peircean-inspired, the object is related to the cultural reality established in public schools of Portuguese-speaking countries. The elements identified in the diagnosis phase (object) are represented in created products (sign)

[4] See about in: https://www.educacaotransmidia.com/. Accessed on: 24 April 2021.

in order to produce engagement and creative expansion in each local experience (interpretant). The logical improvement of each didactic experiment is carried out collectively, according to the aesthetic ideal identified in each community. This is, in our opinion, the perspective of transmedia design applied to educommunication projects.

5 Final considerations

The limits and potentialities of the transmedia design approach for contemporary communication planning were pointed out here from a literature review and discussion of analysis and planning procedures adopted in previous research contexts. The results show that, even though this is still an incipient field of study, there are relevant contributions in the area that justify considering the relevance of the transmedia design approach for various areas of knowledge in contemporary times.

We sought to highlight the etymological approach between sign and design to elucidate the contributions of semiotics to this area of knowledge. Concomitantly, it was emphasized that transmedia logic can be better understood with the adoption of the logical perspective stemming from Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism, which identifies logic with semiotics.

It is argued that transmedia logic, which outlines contemporary communication processes, is useful to elucidate the communicational purposes of the transmedia design approach. This understanding not only underlines the pertinence of the relationship established between design, semiotics and communication in varied contexts of application, but also highlights the need for other researchers to present their theoretical-methodological and empirical-conceptual contributions to this incipient field of investigation.

Acknowledgement

References

Alzamora, G. C. (2018). A semiotic approach to transmedia storytelling. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato. (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to transmedia studies* (pp. 435–462). New York: Routledge.

Alzamora, G. C., & Gambarato, R. R. (2014). Peircean semiotics and transmedia dynamics: Communicational potentiality of the model of semiosis. *Ocula*, *15*, 1–15.

Alzamora, G. C., & Andrade, L. (2019). The transmedia dynamics of fake news by the pragmatic conception of truth. *Matrizes*, *13*(1), 109–131. https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v13i1p109-131

Ashwin, C. (1984). Drawing, design and semiotics. *Design Issues*, *1*(2), 42–52. https://doi.org/10.2307/1511498

Flusser, V. (2007). *O mundo codificado: por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify.

Gambarato, R. R., Alzamora, G. C., & Tárcia, L. P. T. (2020). *Theory, development, and strategy in transmedia storytelling*. London & New York: Routledge.

Gambarato, R. R., Alzamora, G. C., & Tárcia, L. P. T. (2018). 2016 Rio Summer Olympics and the transmedia journalism of planned events. In R. R. Gambarato, & G. C. Alzamora (Eds.), *Exploring transmedia journalism in the digital age* (pp. 126–146). Hershey: IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-3781-6.ch008.

Gambarato, R. R., Alzamora, G. C., Tárcia, L. P. T., & Jurno, A, C. (2017). 2014 FIFA World Cup on the Brazilian Globo Network: A transmedia dynamics? *Global Media and Communication*, *13*(3), 283–301. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766517734256.

Gambarato, R. R., & Tárcia, L. P. T. (2017). Transmedia strategies in journalism: an analytical modelfor the news coverage of planned events. *Journalism Studies*, *18*(11), 1381–1399. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1127769

Gambarato, R. R., Alzamora, G. C., & Tárcia, L. P. T. (2016). Russian news coverage of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games: A transmedia analysis. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*, 1446–1469.

Gambarato, R. R. (2013). Transmedia Project design: theoretical and analytical considerations. *Baltic Screen Media Review*, *1*, 80–100. https://doi.org/10.1515/bsmr-2015-0006

Jenkins, H. (2017). Transmedia logics and locations. In B. W. L. Derhy Kurtz, & M. Bourdaa (Eds.), *The rise of transtexts: Challenges and opportunities* (pp. 220–240). New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2016). Youth voice, media, and political engagement. Introducing the core concepts. In H. Jenkins, S. Shresthova, L. Gamber-Thompson, N. Kliglervilenchik, & A. Zimmerman (Eds.), *By any media necessary: The new youth activism* (pp. 1–60). New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2010, June 21). Transmedia education: The 7 princples revisited. *Henry Jenkins*. http://henryjenkins.org/2010/06/transmedia_education_the_7_pri.html

Jenkins, H. (2009, December 12). Revenge of the origami unicorn: The remaining four principles of transmedia storytelling. *Henry Jenkins*. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/revenge_of_the_origami_unicorn.html

Kinder, M. (1991). *Playing with power in movies, television, and video games: From Muppet babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Monloney, K. (2018). Designing transmedia journalism projects. In R. R. Gambarato, & G. C. Alzamora (Eds.), *Exploring transmedia journalism in the digital age* (pp. 83–103). Hershey: IGI Global.

Peirce Edition Project. (Ed.). (1998). The essential Peirce: Selected philosophical writings (1893–1913) (Vols. 1-2). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Santaella, L. (2001). *Matrizes da linguagem e pensamento: sonora, visual, verbal, aplicações na hipermídia*. São Paulo: Iluminuras.

Santaella, L., & Nöth, W. (2005). *Semiótica e comunicação*. São Paulo: Paulus.

Senz, A. L., & Pereira, A. T. C. (2016, May 17–19). *Design transmidia: Em busca de definições* [Paper presentation]. II Jornada Internacional GEMInIS, São Carlos, SP, Brazil. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322723562_Design_transmidia_em_busca_de_definicoes

About the author

Geane Carvalho Alzamora
geanealzamora@ufmg.br
Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG)