21ST CENTURY TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING: EXPERIENCING NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION

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Abstract

Who has never experienced the feeling of being lost in a story; of getting so involved in a story that you lose track of time or even forget where you are? Who has never felt empathy with a character? Who has never bought a product or made a donation after being persuaded by an inspiring story? Researchers refer to these behaviours as narrative transportation, a metaphor proposed by Richard Gerrig [1] for describing experiences in which readers are transported into a narrative journey by virtue of performing that narrative. Following Gerrig, in 2000, Green and Brock [2] conceptualized transportation as a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative. They distinguished transportation from elaboration, a kind of divergent process in which persuasion leads to an attitude change via evaluation of arguments. More recently, the phenomenon of narrative transportation has been taken as a prototypical form of experiential response in transmedia storytelling. [3] As it is well known, transmedia storytelling expands a single universe through different and well-structured story pieces that users are invited to get in and out. Recent evidence from neuroscience [4] corroborates the idea that oxytocin, a hormone molecule involved in social behaviour, can regulate the homeostasis that draws consumers’ connection with characters and influence pro-social behaviour in immersive narratives. In this paper, inspired by these findings, we propose that, in order to deliver more interactive and constructive learning experiences, transportation needs to be balanced with the divergent process of knowledge elaboration in a kind of “homeostatic transmedia structure”. We suggest that this approach not only grabs students’ attention and facilitates understanding, as it has the potential to make people more likely to act critically in the era of post-truth.

Keywords: Narrative transportation, transmedia storytelling, 21st century skills, interactive learning experiences, neuroscience of narrative.

1 INTRODUCTION

Stories dominate and touch nearly every aspect of our lives. Their role extends far beyond entertainment through conventional films and novels.

Archaeologists dig up clues in the stones and bones and piece them together into a saga about the past. Historians too are storytellers. […] Business executives are increasingly told that they must be creative storytellers: they have to spin compelling narratives about their products and brands that emotionally transport consumers. Political commentators see a presidential election not only as a contest between charismatic politicians and their ideas, but also as a competition between conflicting stories about the nation’s past and future. Legal scholars envision a trial as a story contest. […] Much good journalism is shaped in an intensely storylike way. […] We tell some of the best stories to ourselves. Scientists have discovered that the memories we use to form our own life stories are boldly fictionalized. […] Then there are the rich stories in the bedrock of all religious traditions. […] And what about poetry or stand up comedy or the rapid rise of increasingly storylike video games that allow a player to be a character in a virtual reality drama? What about the way many of us serialize our autobiographies in Facebook and Twitter posts? […] We are soaked to the bone in story. [5, pp. 12-18]

Through stories, we share fragments of life and communicate with others, building ourselves through the various narratives that are present around us. Whether real or fictional, the rich and diverse experiences embedded in narratives are integral to how we learn about our environment and how we come to understand, process and memorize information. [6] [7] By giving meaning and personal importance to narrative content, stories also allow the emergence of emotions essential in building a sense of belonging with others in community. [8]
While emotions help us to understand the world around us and shape how we organize and communicate our life experiences, storytelling enables us to notice, understand, categorize, explain, and manage emotions generated from the world of experiences. [7]

Importantly, engaging stories evoke in us the need to act. Consider the following extract from Zak [9]

During a night flight home to California after five days in Washington, D.C., I discovered that I am the last person you would want sitting next to you on a plane. Tired and unable to bang on my laptop in the turbulence at 40,000 feet, I decided to watch Million Dollar Baby. I hadn’t seen it, but I figured a Clint Eastwood–directed film that had won the Oscar for Best Picture would be a deserved break for a hard week.

It is a wonderful film, and I became deeply absorbed in it. The narrative is circumscribed by a fatherdaughter story and concludes with an agonizing act. When the movie was over, the man next to me said, “Sir, is there something I can do to help you?” I was crying. Well, not really crying, more like heaving big sloppy sobs out of my eyes and nose and mouth. Everyone around could hear me but I could not suppress my sadness.

After I recovered, I began to wonder what had happened to me. I was cognitively intact, aware of my surroundings and who I was. And yet the story was so engaging that it caused my brain to react as if I were a character in the move, as if one of my daughters were the one suffering. I experienced heartache as the movie ended, but then it was only a story.

(Box 01).

Box 01. Anecdotal account from Paul Zak. [9, p.2]

According to Zak [9], stories like Million Dollar Baby not only sustain attention and generate emotional resonance, but also inspire post-narrative concern about others. Evidence exists in support of the claim that even knowing that moving stories are fictional and portrayed by professional actors, consumers are willing to donate money to a campaign or to send money to a stranger.

Psycholinguists have shown that effective stories induce “transportation” into the narrative. Transportation happens when one loses oneself in the flow of the story – just like I did while watching Million Dollar Baby. To understand the psychological effects of stories, we included surveys of narrative transportation and concern for story characters in the StoryCorps study. Both narrative transportation and concern predicted post-story donations. This shows how stories affect behaviour after the story has ended: we have put ourselves into the narrative. Even a week after the experiment, accurate story recall was predicted by a single measure: narrative transportation. [9, p. 10]

Consider now the story Lamp, a commercial launched in September 2002 by IKEA. On TV, the camera zooms in a woman replacing a red lamp desk by a new one and discarding it in the sidewalk as trash. The video is worth watching before continuing (at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PzlCJrsg6g).

It is a rainy night and shots from the red lamp’s perspective show the new lamp in a warm and safe room. For advertisers, the genius of the advertisement rests on how quickly it is able to establish an emotional connection between the viewer and the lamp … until actor Jonas Fornander (with his Swedish accent) drops in the scene and brings reality back like a bomb: “Many of you feel bad for this lamp. This is because you’re crazy. This lamp has no feelings. And the new one is much better.”

Although consumers are not deluded about the reality of the lamp, their pleasure of imagining the lamp’s journey is abruptly interrupted and they are brought back to reality. Even facing this unexpected break, consumers feel touched by Lamp. IKEA reports an increase in sales in her furniture shops during the weeks following the commercial. However, from the point of view of the story, viewers intimately stay wondering about a sequel for the red lamp destiny. The feeling elicited from being lost in a story persists in time.

Narrative transportation is a familiar experience to many people and has been granted some attention in the last 30 years. Most research on the topic follows the conceptualization given in 1993 by Richard Gerrig. [1] Using the literal experience of travelling as a metaphor for reading, Gerrig [1]
defined narrative transportation as a construct for describing experiences in which readers are transported into a narrative journey by virtue of performing that narrative.

Someone (the traveller) is transported, by some means of transportation, as a result of performing certain actions. The traveller goes some distance from his or her world of origin, which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible. The traveller returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey. [1, pp.10-11]

There are several consequences of performing an engaging narrative. An important one is that the reader enters in a state of detachment from the original real world. Also important is the psychological distance from reality. While immersed, the reader may ignore facts that contradict assertions made in the story. In addition, experiencing narrative transportation may change readers in several ways.

At a minimum, individuals are changed by having a memory of what they read; evidence suggests, however, that changes may be more profound, including belief change. Further consequences of being transported may include a feeling of suspense or other emotional responses. [10, p. 325]

Van Laer et al. [11] identified beliefs but also affective and cognitive responses as potential consequences of narrative transportation: “whereas affective responses are emotional in nature and represent expressions of feelings, cognitive responses […] are critical or narrative in nature and reflect expressions of thoughts”. [11, p. 804]

Following Gerrig [1], Green and Brock [2] described the consumer’s experience of being carried away by the story, as a convergent process where all mental systems and capacities of the reader become focused on events occurring in the narrative. They distinguish transportation from elaboration, a kind of divergent process in which persuasion leads to an attitude change via evaluation of arguments.

Transportation may make narrative experience seem more like real experience. [It] is likely to create strong feelings toward story characters; the experiences or beliefs of those characters may then have an enhanced influence on readers’ beliefs. […] Rather than having a single focus (e.g., the narrative), a person engaged in elaboration might be accessing his or her own opinions, previous knowledge, or other thoughts and experiences in order to evaluate the message at hand. Under high elaboration, connections are established to an individual’s other schemas and experiences. In contrast, under high transportation, the individual may be distanced temporarily from current and previous schemas and experiences. [2, p. 702]

Importantly, the more absorbed consumers are in a story, the more the story changes them. Highly absorbed consumers also detect significantly fewer “false notes” in stories than less transported ones.

And in this there is an important lesson about the mouldering power of story. When we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and sceptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to leave us defenceless. [5, pp. 151-152]

Although consumers do not stay uninterrupted transported in stories, interactive fictions may become so appealing that they will be reluctant to leave stories behind.

This is something that the optimistic Star Trek series never quite got right. The holodeck is, like the hydrogen bomb, a technology with hideous destructive potential. […] But are they [the stories] becoming a weakness? There’s an analogy to be made between our craving for story and our craving for food. A tendency to overeat served our ancestors well when food storages were a predictable part of life. But now that we modern desk jockeys are awash in cheap grease and corn syrup, overeating is more likely to fatten us up and kill us young. Likewise, it could be that an intense greed for stories was healthy for our ancestors but has some harmful consequences in a world where books, MP3 players, TVs, and iPhones make story omnipresent. [5, p. 197]

Investigating real-life implications of digital storytelling practices, Gretter et al. [7] expressed their concern about the consequences of narrative transportation when embedded in the massive exchange of misinformed stories that often occurs online. “Being transported into a story is not new. We’ve experienced it reading novels and comic books, watching our favourite show, and listening to the radio. What is new is youth’s constant and involuntary exposure to unfiltered stories in online spaces”. [7, p. 4] Community building through narrative transposition may blur the distinction between facts and fantasies. [7, p. 3]. “It is essential for educators to equip children and young adults with
intellectual tools to detect when the misrepresentation of reality—intentional or not—in digital stories can have consequences in real life". [7, p. 2]

Narrative transportation suggests that the engaging, immersive experience of a story, which can facilitate strong affective responses and low levels of critical thinking, can have unintended negative consequences, especially in online spaces. Fanfiction, online advertising and radicalization provide examples of how young individuals face challenges in determining the blurred line between facts and fiction. While these challenges are significant, educators should not shy away from using the affordances of digital storytelling for teaching. [7, p. 10]

Gretter et al. [7] make three recommendations for integrating digital storytelling into teaching and learning settings that highlight the core principles of media literacy put forward by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE, 2017) (https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8j2T8jHrlgCYXVHSVJidWtmbmc/view): (1) emphasizing literary and narrative-based pedagogy; (2) developing analytical competencies around transmedia storytelling; and (3) viewing digital storytelling as situated learning.

Indeed, more recently, narrative transportation has been taken as a prototypical form of experiential response in transmedia storytelling [3], a narrative structure that unfolds across multiple technological platforms, with new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. [12] That is, transmedia expands a single universe through different and well-structured story pieces that consumers are invited to get in and out. Consumers navigate an open field of experiences with multiple potential touchpoints where engagement can occur.

No doubt, transmedia storytelling may constitute a rich learning environment. However, when narrative pieces transport consumers so deeply that their minds enter low levels of awareness about truth, consumers may become trapped in a holodeck. For Murray [13], a holodeck represents a fantasy of everything that digital representation might bring us. Along the road of the holodeck, “interactive narrative may be experienced through small, hand held game consoles, online hypertext, or highly immersive virtual reality systems”. [14, p. 101] “Could we pose it at the service of storytelling?”—asks Murray. [13] Her answer is affirmative. She proposes that narratives with multiple contradictory alternatives require active participation of the audience members, resulting in them feeling to be part of the unfolding story.

The sense of engagement though interaction is essential to a constructive transmedia experience. So, when contrary alternatives are presented to consumers, critical re-engagement becomes essential.

In this paper we argue that, in order to deliver interactive learning experiences, transportation needs to be balanced with the divergent process of knowledge elaboration that follows from thinking systematically about the whole in/out journey. Particularly, elaboration is indispensable for dealing with the challenges posed by junk stories and fake news that take over our post-truth massive digital life, and for making of the 21st century transmedia a constructive and fruitful approach to human storytelling.

Inspired by an analysis of commercial campaigns, the approach here proposed allows us to anticipate implications for storytelling pedagogy, an enterprise that, like advertising, requires careful planning for attaining its goals.

In section 2 we review aspects of transmedia storytelling relevant for understanding the role of transportation in structuring narrative transmedia. In section 3 we propose a neuro-informed approach to transmedia transportation based on recent evidence from neuroscience that suggests an important role for a neuropeptide called oxytocin in pro-social behaviour. A final consideration about the potential of our approach to the study of transmedia transportation is made in section 4.

2 TRANSMEDIA WITH NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION

Every single element of a transmedia story has to be fulfilling a narrative purpose, without exception. [15, p. 43]

The expression transmedia storytelling was coined by Henry Jenkins in his 2003 paper [16] and elaborated further in “Convergence Culture” [12] and in “Confessions of an Aca-Fan” (http://henryjenkins.org/archives-html/). For Jenkins, transmedia storytelling represents a process of experiencing a whole story from different discursive pieces: “transmedia storytelling is about the logic of discursive pieces and the integration of pieces, which means that each piece adds something new.
to the experience of the whole story.” [17] Accordingly, the whole-storyness is better characterized as a sense that belongs to those experiencing transmedia; and shifting between medias means that someone who goes transmedia has new experiences and learn new things [18]. It is a matter of scale: either the reader experiences a single piece of story or a unified and coordinated story-chunks. [15, p. 15]

Transmedia storytelling obeys some conventions. In addition to narrative universe, stories and characters, experts have brought to the forefront of research three complementary components that are relevant to the study of transportation: platforms, interfaces and touchpoints; performance in time; and audience participation. [19]

2.1 Platforms, interfaces and touchpoints

In transmedia, the narrative universe is disseminated through different media platforms and interfaces. So, the fictional and the media merge strategies. In order to reach and attract the largest number of consumers, a transmedia structure usually offers several touchpoints (rabbit holes). The transmedia author has to prepare these entries for advancing the plot. A classical way is to provide a backstory. [15, p. 50] Some pieces may eventually convey world building information about time, place and mood. “In cinema, the equivalent might be an establishing shot: the quick sweep over the grounds of the high school before a scene starts in a classroom, for example, or the flyover of the Eiffel Tower to convey that the characters are in Paris”. [15, p. 43].

But importantly, to promote interactivity in narrative transportation, transmedia pieces will not give explicitly characters or plots, but an imagery intended to evoke a specific idea or emotional response. Storytelling practices (short-stories in particular) provide authors with some possibilities. Entries can take the form of an ultra-condensed story, for example as in Monterroso’s The Dinosaur. When he woke up, the dinosaur was still there [20]; or the form of a counterfactual sentence, as in the Heartography campaign launched on May 2015 by Nikon Asia, whose introduction started with a What if emotions could take photographs? (http://heartography.nikon-asia.com/introduction) [21]; or even the form of a metonymy, as in IKEA’s Cook this Page campaign (see section 2.2).

In transmedia, a narrative intended as “a continuous dialogue between the involved publishing platforms and the consideration of creative and consumer spaces that belong to each of them, necessarily [starts] from the audiences, at all times”. [22, p.19]

2.2 Performance in Time

In transmedia storytelling, narrative transportation may occur for each piece, but it is by virtue of performing an integration of pieces that transmedia campaigns achieve their meaning and have a pedagogical role. Temporality of a transmedia narrative refers to the moment of consumption and duration of use, as well as to the temporality of the story itself.

Time in a story can stretch, slow down, stop; it can be eluded, reassembled, and then destructured. Some transmedia experiences create moments, others last in time; some transmedia experiences only propose very ephemeral things, others propose more durable ones. […]. Experts also point out the difficulty of sustaining a transmedia project over time. [19, p. 41]

Transmedia consumers most often pause, advance or rewind the narrative to discover all the contents of the fictional universe. “On multiple interfaces, some users can spend a lot of time browsing transmedia platforms and returning to them”. [3]

An interesting case that illustrates the tractable nature of time in advertising stories is IKEA’s Campaign called Lamp. As shown in the Introduction (Box 01), the campaign was launched in September 2002 and left viewers wondering about a sequel for the red lamp destiny. Reinforcing the myth that the access to stylized commodities is the basis of individual happiness and freedom, a second advertisement was delivered still in September 2002, now having a fanciful ceramic cow creamer as protagonist (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=52FVcN-yKzo). After scenes of sadness about the Moo Cow Milker destiny, actor Jonas Fornander, again, breaks the viewer’s emotional flow. It is still the same message. “You feel sad for the Moo Cow Milker? That is because you are crazy. Tacky items can easily be replaced with better IKEA.” Less than a month apart, consumers memories are still fresh, consolidating the feeling and the message.
Fast-forwarding to 2018, we are contemplated with a new Lamp advertisement by IKEA Canadian, now with a modern twist (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-czRExdnao). Starting from the abandoned scene of Lamp 1, the sun shines again and Lamp 2 shows a young girl finding the red lamp, taking it home, installing a new light bulb and discovering that it works. In company of her red friend, the girl plays games, does her homework and reads stories. Dropping now in the new final scene, actor Fornander changes the message: “Many of you feel happy for this lamp. That is not crazy. Reusing things is much better.”

At first sight, the messages from Lamp 1 and Lamp 2 seem contradictory. It is even possible to imagine two groups of fans taking sides one against the another, as is typical in the post-truth era: one in favor of an environmental-sustainable argument, the other against it. However, as discussed in Dal Pian et al. [23], a systematic recapitulation of the whole campaign taking Lamp 1 and Lamp 2 as pieces of a sequel structured by a frame-shifting, allows the construction of an integrated understanding. Indeed, before Lamp 2 was launched, IKEA had doubts about which path to take: to let the 2018 advertisement stand alone as a new piece of work or in a sequel with Lamp 1? Reporting on thoughts of the team in charge of developing Lamp 2, David Gianatasio, from Adweek, tells us.

Ikea Canada chief marketor Lauren MacDonald says she was a fan of the “Lamp 2” concept even before the agency presented specific treatments, and she championed the sequel during its development. “I will admit, I was outnumbered in the room— not everyone liked it as much as I did,” she recalls. “We had some good constructive conversations internally: ‘Can it stand alone as its own body of work if consumers don’t remember the first ad?’ ‘Should we dare to take on the challenge of a sequel?’ ‘What if we can’t live up to the first one?’ After a lot of discussion and soliciting different points of view, we decided to take the leap.” [24]

Narrative transportation may indeed extend consumers’ experiences. So, when a new piece is launched, the memories previously created are blended with the new one. Even sixteen years apart, time may be compressed and work in favor of an integration between what could look like as two sides of the truth.

2.3 Audience Participation

In narrative transportation, interaction with consumers is essential from the start. The experience, however, needs to be sustained along the narrative performance, not to say increased and made to last. “Participation and immersion may enhance the content of the story”, says Derbaix et al. [19, p. 41] It does so for an already committed audience, but also for potential consumers.

Transmedia storytelling is a good strategy for involving consumers. Apart from emotional engagement, interaction can transport consumers into the heart of a narrative universe, inspiring them to feel participative and active even after the experience has ended. According to Phillips [15], interaction, as used in transmedia, requires audience’s action to learn about the story. “Allowing audiences to interact with the story world can add tremendous depth of engagement”. [15, pp. 119] In interactive transmedia with transportation, the goal is often to create an illusion of interaction, not to let consumers dictate how the story goes.

If you provide enough moments where [consumers] feel that they are having an effect on the story, then the whole thing becomes imbued with the impression that [consumers] have affected the outcome, even if there was never a real alternative outcome. [15, p. 122]

Learning about the story, however, involves real elaboration, an effort that requires a “wake-up” return of consumers to the original world.

An interesting example of an interactive campaign that conjoins illusion and actual engagement is IKEA’s Cook this Page, developed at Leo Burnett Toronto. Launched in October 2016, the campaign was intended to make time in the kitchen more fun, easy and creative for people. An advertisement invited them to participate in In-Store Events in IKEA stores in Canada, with alive demonstrations of recipes’ set up and cooking (the video is worth watching before continuing at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSaxVypFHP8).

With step-by-step instructions and a list of ingredients precisely illustrated on the parchment paper to match actual proportions, the only thing one had to do was add food, roll it all up and bake it. The sheets are printed with food-safe ink. With the fill-in-the-blank directions, you can place the salmon, meatballs, shrimps, fruit crumble and other ingredients inside the printed...
layouts. Finally, roll up the paper with all the ingredients and get ready to cook your meal. (Leo Burnett at http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2017/ikea-cook-this-page/)

The transmedia campaign also included a series of four parchment paper posters, that were offered to customers during the events. Consumers could take the posters home and buy the ingredients and kitchen items. All 12,500 posters available in the stores were snatched up within hours.

More simple, impossible. As suggested by Phillips [15], when a transmedia project inspires a feeling of accomplishment in the audience members, they understand what is going on. [15, p. 121] Probably, those who left the store with a poster had the opportunity to consolidate their understanding and skills. They went home not only inspired to cook IKEA's interactive recipe but also inspired to create new ones. With some advice and elaboration, cooking in IKEA's style could become a pedagogical experience for learning about measurements, area, volume, proportion and nutritional facts.

Interestingly, the campaign asked consumers to rethink how to use recipes taking the typical do-it-yourself approach of IKEA's furniture assembly project. "In a very playful and fun way, the campaign was what IKEA usually does with the manufacture manuals, but does that for food", says Matthias Fichinger, executive creative director at Leo Burnett Frankfurt (see https://player.vimeo.com/video/218951336?title=false&byline=false&portrait=false). For example, similar to the construction instructions of the Brazilian Ânguerra house (Fig. 01), parchment paper posters are as much about what is built as they are about its communication (https://www.designboom.com/architecture/tiago-do-vale-architects-anguera-ikea-04-15-19/).

Fig. 01: Assembly Manual in IKEA's language (Brazilian Ânguerra House)

3 A NEURO-INFORMED APPROACH TO TRANSMEDIA TRANSPORTATION

In transmedia storytelling, the most influential narrative paradigm is known as the hero's journey pattern, formulated by Joseph Campbell. In his influential book The hero with a thousand faces [25], Campbell proposed a theory that all myths, no matter their religious, cultural, national and historical heritage, follow the same structural three acts’ pattern: (Act 1) an individual is invited to take on a journey and (Act 2) in doing so he/she faces many challenges and obstacles before attaining the goal of the journey, retrieving the prize and (Act 3) eventually returning, transformed, to the world from which he/she came.

For those working with narrative transportation, it is impossible to ignore the similitude of Campbell’s account with Gerrig’s 1993 definition. Indeed, as pointed out by Nell [26]:

In tamer form, Gerrig’s definition of the reader’s transportation recapitulates the hero’s journey [...] Precisely because Gerrig’s account of the reader’s journey is tamed and domesticated, it captures an exceedingly important aspect of the way in which the everyday use of narrative does indeed recapitulate the most fundamental aspect of grand mythology, which is the endless cycle of death and rebirth that ensures the hero’s immortality. It does so by domesticating immortality as hope […] an infinitely more usable [idea] in day-to-day affairs than immortality". [26, p. 21]

As such, narrative transportation can be thought of as a cycle that begins and ends in the ordinary world of a hero. After being called to a mission, the hero sees himself/herself in an unknown world, to finally discover new meanings and values for living in the ordinary world. In transmedia storytelling, the expansion of a single universe through different well-structured pieces would then represent cycles able to inspire consumers to act towards a pro-social behaviour.

For those like the traveler Paul Zak, who watched Million Dollar Baby in his night flight back to California (Box 01), stories with a dramatic pattern such as the hero’s journey, sustain attention by
building suspense: “the climax of the story keeps us on the edge of our neural seats until the tension is relieved at the finish”. [9, p. 7] Zak, a neuroeconomist, had good reasons to suppose that a small molecule called oxytocin, that he presumed motivate people to engage in cooperative behaviours, could have an impact on post-narrative concern about others. In a series of experiments where subjects had their ACTH (AdrenoCorticoTropic Hormone) and oxytocin measured while consuming short narrative pieces, Zak discovered that participants who had higher levels of both ACTH and oxytocin were more kin to perform costly acts of altruism.

When stories elicited an increase in both ACTH and oxytocin, donation were 261% higher than when one or both of these biomolecules did not rise. This finding makes sense: if we do not attend to a story it will not pull us into its narrative arc. Attention is a scarce neural resource because it is metabolically costly to a brain that needs to conserve resources. If a story does not sustain our attention, then the brain will look for something else more interesting to do. [9, p. 6]

For Zak [9], findings like these could explain why his brain reacted as it did during that night flight to California. A recent study [4] refines Zak’s insights: behaviorally, oxytocin appears to draw our attention to personal relationships but doesn’t necessarily direct the emotions of them. Brian Resnick, a science reporter from vox.com, reports:

Daniel Quintana, a biological psychiatry researcher at the University of Oslo and the lead author of that study, tells me “…it [is] clearer to me that oxytocin is more of a regulatory hormone [i.e. a hormone that helps the body maintain its homeostasis] that happens to influence social behavior. […] It tries to maintain stability in a changing environment”. [27, p. 2]

In a situation of “transmedia homeostasis”, consumers not only perform narrative transportation, as they are systematically submitted to breaks in attention. It is then feasible to suppose that an extension of Gerrig’s metaphor able to bear a homeostatic structure, may constitute a methodological contribution for treating the illusions of the post-truth era.

4 FINAL REMARK

“Human beings are apes with a storytelling mind” —says Gottschall. As a species we are addicted to stories and, on the whole, this has been a good thing to us. Stories give us pleasure and instruction, they simulate worlds so we can live better in this one. [5] However, in the post-truth era, as digital technologies evolve, interactive narratives become so appealing that we may become reluctant to leave them behind.

The real threat isn’t that story will fade our human life in the future; it’s that story will take over completely. Maybe we can avoid this fate. Maybe like disciplined dieters, we can make nutritious choices and avoid gorging on story. [5, p. 198]

In his book, Gottschall makes several suggestions for us to try to avoid this fate. “Remember that we are, by nature, suckers for story. When emotionally absorbed in character and plot, we are easy to mold and manipulate”. [5, pp. 198] However, although Gottschall is aware that experiencing a story alters our neurochemical processes, and makes assertions about memory and mirror neurons (brain cells that fire not only when we perform an action, but when we observe someone else performing the same action), he does not elaborate an integrated account towards a neuroscience of narrative as does Zak. [9] The point is: when consumers experience transportation, the brain activity of both storytellers and consumers starts to align thanks to mirror neurons. “As we become involved with a story, fictional things come to seem real in our bodies”. [28, p. 3].

Therefore, in order to make of this embodied feeling an opportunity for creativity and instruction, cycles of “entry-performance-exit” need careful planning. Exits are essential as are entries. According to Phillips: [in transmedia] “you need to build in escape routes and back doors, because you never know when you will need to make a hasty exit. This is particularly the case if you are planning on telling an ongoing or interactive narrative and will be adding the story as you go”. [15, p. 77]

Indeed, all narrative cases exemplified in this paper include exit doors. In Box 01, Zak was brought back to reality by a passenger; in IKEA’s Lamp 1 and Lamp 2, consumers’ transportation-flows were interrupted by actor Jonas Fornander; in IKEA’s Cook this Page, consumers left stores inspired to create real cooking, possibly with others.

Although the approach presented in this paper still deserves further elaboration, we now have fresh and promising insights —informed by neuroscience— to investigate the intriguing phenomenon of
narrative transportation. “The better we understand how stories unfold in our bodies, the more equipped we are to thrive in the story-rich environment of the twenty-first century”. [28, p. 1]

REFERENCES


