Understanding Transmedia Storytelling: Reception and Narrative Comprehension in Bill Willingham's *Fables* Franchise

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Abstract

This study explores the reception and understanding of the transmedia ensemble surrounding Bill Willingham's *Fables* (2002-2015), a comic series reimagining fairytale characters in a modern setting. *Fables* expands its narrative across multiple media, including spin-off comics, a novel, and the video game *The Wolf Among Us*. This research investigates key questions: Can we identify a distinct group of transmedia consumers? What elements of the narrative sustain interest across media? A survey of 58 participants reveals that while most enter the franchise through the comic series, a significant number are introduced via the video game. The findings indicate that *Fables* fans are highly engaged transmedia consumers, with a majority exploring several parts of the franchise wanting to pursue narrative exploration. This study offers insights into how transmedia narratives are consumed, emphasizing the role of familiar story elements in encouraging cross-media engagement.

1 Introduction

This study examines the reception and narrative comprehension of Bill Willingham's *Fables* franchise (2002-2015), which is emblematic of a particularly rich movement in the adaptation of fairy tales across multiple media. In the words of James Poniewozik, today, fairy tales are "parodied, ironized, meta-fictionalized, politically adjusted and pop-culture saturated." Each year, countless adaptations of fairy tales emerge in films, comics, television series, and video games.

Scholarly work has explored the representation of fairytale characters across various media. For example, Catherine Orenstein's *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale* (2003) delves into adaptations of Little Red Riding Hood. Similarly, *Fairytales in Popular Culture*, edited by Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek, provides an extensive inventory of fairytale adaptations though it lacks in-depth comparative analysis. Neta Gordon's *A Tour of Fabletown, Patterns and Plots in Bill Willingham's Fables* (2016) offers a focused study on the *Fables* comic series but does not explore the broader transmedia universe or the interconnectedness of the franchise's adaptations. Often, analyses focus on specific elements like character representation or psychological motifs, without fully conceptualizing the transmedia narrative universe and its reception.

There is a paradox here: while the expansion of fairytales into transmedia ensembles is increasingly common, there is a lack of robust tools to conceptualize the construction and understanding of narratives within this paradigm. This article aims to provide an example of how to analyze the reception and understanding of a transmedia narrative. Henry Jenkins argues in *Convergence Culture* that "The most committed consumers track down data spread across multiple media, scanning each and every text for insights into the world" (2006, 95). But does such a committed consumer really exist? This study tests the hypothesis of a committed consumer who engages with the entire transmedia corpus, moving from one medium to another to piece together the full narrative.

I chose to focus on *Fables*' transmedia ensemble for several reasons. Firstly, it is itself an adaptation of an existing set of stories – fairytales – potentially simplifying the reception and narrative comprehension since readers and players are

already familiar with the original characters. Secondly, this transmedia ensemble has clear temporal boundaries, with most of the comics, spin-offs, crossovers, digital comics and video game prequel being released between 2002 and 2015 with the exception of *Batman vs. Bigby! A Wolf in Gotham* (Willingham, 2022), a crossover mini-series, and the upcoming video game *The Wolf Among Us 2*, set for release in 2024.

From 2006 to 2011, concurrent with the publication of *Fables*, episodes of the spin-off *Jack of Fables* (Willingham et al., 2006-2011) were released, focusing on the character of Jack. The series also includes two spin-offs centered on female protagonists: *Cinderella* (Roberson and McManus, 2009-2010), which portrays Cinderella as a spy in the world of *Fables*, and *Fairest* (Willingham et al., 2012-2015), where each episode focuses on a secondary female character from *Fables*. The transmedia corpus also includes *Peter and Max: A Fables Novel* (Willingham, 2011), a prequel inspired by Grimm's tales, and *The Wolf Among Us* (Telltale Game, 2014), an episodic videogame that serves as a prequel to the comic book series. In this point-and-click game, the player takes on the role of Bigby Wolf, the sheriff of Fabletown, whose job it is to "prevent Fables from killing each other." This video game was later adapted into a digital comic book (Justus and Sturges, 2015).

In this study, we are particularly interested in the following questions:

1. What is the point of entry for consumers into the franchise?

I hypothesize that while most consumers likely encounter the *Fables* universe through the comic book series, the video game *The Wolf Among Us* might serve as an alternative entry point due to Telltale Games' popularity.

2. Can we identify a specific group that aligns with Jenkins' concept of the transmedia consumer?

I am particularly interested in identifying whether a specific demographic corresponds to Jenkins' transmedia consumer, with the hypothesis that this group is likely under forty, given the rise of transmedial practices post-1980s.

3. What elements attract consumers to the transmedia ensemble of *Fables*?

I suspect that consumers are initially drawn by the revival of fairytale characters and are further engaged by the worldbuilding developed within the series.

4. Are consumers aware of the different elements within the *Fables* transmedia ensemble?

It is possible that consumers are aware of some elements but unlikely that they have engaged with all of them.

5. Do consumers of one of the elements of the franchise tend to be interested in the various spin-offs and crossovers as well?

I anticipate that consumers who engage with one part of the franchise are likely to explore at least one other element within the transmedia ensemble.

2   Survey Methodology

I conducted a survey with unpaid participants who were recruited via social media (Facebook and Twitter, with support from Bill Willingham). I specified that it was not necessary to have read the entire series to participate, aiming for a representative sample of *Fables*' readership. A total of 70 participants responded to the questionnaire. I have chosen to only keep participants who completed the full questionnaire, i.e. 58 people. The first questions focused on the participant's demographics (age, gender, comic readings and video games playing frequency). The seventh question was specifically about Fables: "Have you read Fables? If so, have you finished it? If not, at what volume did you stop and why?". The next five questions focused on the elements of the transmedia set of *Fables*. Participants were asked if they had played *The Wolf Among Us* and read the comics *The Wolf Among Us*, *Jack of Fables*, *Fairest*, *Cinderella* and the *Peter & Max* novel. Participants were then asked to answer open-ended questions on their familiarity with and enjoyment of *Fables*' transmedia universe.

3   Results and Discussion

I will address each of the previously mentioned research questions using results from the survey.

3.1 Point of Entry

In our questionnaire, we asked readers/players about their reception practices. We specifically asked: "How did you discover the comics series and/or the videogame? Did reading the comics/playing the video game make you want to read/play the other one? Why? Which one did you start with?". Out of 57 relevant responses, 35 participants (61%) discovered the franchise through the comics, while 22 (39%) started with the video game (39%). Those who entered through the video game often cited the graphics, world-building, and character development as key factors that piqued their interest. For example, one participant noted: "I discovered the video game due to me playing other Telltale games at the time. After finishing it, I immediately lept into the comics, because of how much I loved the characters and setting. And I wanted to see what else could happen in that universe." Other comments also point to a reading motivated by the storyworld.

3.2 Transmedia Consumer Profile

Of the 57 participants who revealed their gender, 19 identified as female (33%) and 38 identified as male (67%). Of the 53 participants who gave us their age, the majority were between 20 and 40 years old (74%) (Table 1) aligning with the age group most familiar with transmedia practices.

3.3 Elements of Interest

In our questionnaire, we asked whether readers tended to read the entire series of comics. A majority of participants (74%) read the entire *Fables* series. Their interest was driven by the adaptation of fairytales (40% of participants): "I liked how he used the existing fiction as a counterpoint to the story;" "I liked the attention to detail and the numerous references to world mythology and fairy tales." More specifically, participants insist on the difference between this

Age	Participants
<20	3
20-29	18
30-39	21
40-49	7
50-60	4

Table 1: Age of the participants

adaptation and Disney's. One participant noted: "I love that Fables acknowledges the fundamental hopefulness and hopelessness of fairytales […]. These are all morality tales, but unlike let's say the Disney versions the moral of the story is not dumbed down or streamlined. Fairytales are romantic and enchanting and fantastical and dreamy and beautiful. And this is where it would end if this were Disney. The reality though? They can be and often are horrific." Many participants (60%) also note their attachment to characters like Bigby and Snow. World-building was also a significant factor, mentioned by 16% of participants. It appears that the consumers' engagement with transmedia ensemble is partially guided by the reference to their preexisting narrative knowledge. Readers of *Fables* are interested in what the possibility of a transmedia ensemble offers: a recombination of fairytale characters and the construction of a complex fictional universe.

3.4 Awareness of Transmedia Elements

In our survey, we also asked participants: "Are you aware that *Fables*' fictional universe is present on different media? How do you conceive of the relationship between *Fables* and its spin-offs and adaptation to videogames?". Some participants were not initially aware that *Fables* spanned multiple media but expressed interest in exploring the franchise further after completing the survey. The idea of a prequel in videogame format was particularly appealing due to the enhanced interactivity and immersion it offers. Several participants note multiple times in the survey that they have read all the spin-offs, and one of them even mentions owning a derivative product,

Title	Participants	Percentage
Fables	55	95%
The Wolf Among Us (game)	44	76%
Jack of Fables	37	64%
Fairest	36	62%
Cinderella	34	59%
The Wolf Among Us (comics)	27	47%
Peter and Max	25	43%

Table 2: Number and percentage of participants who have read or played each title of *Fables*' transmedia universe

Number of elements	Participants	Percentage
1	4	7%
2	6	10%
3	10	17%
4	9	16%
5	6	10%
6	16	28%
7	7	12%

Table 3: Number of elements belonging to the transmedia ensemble consumed by participants

bookends, in which the characters of *Fables* seem to come straight out of the books.

3.5 Engagement with Spin-offs

Finally, I asked readers about their knowledge of each element of the transmedia ensemble of *Fables* (Table 2). A majority of participants engaged with multiple elements of the franchise, with the exception of *Peter and Max* and the digital comics derived from *The Wolf Among Us*, showing that users are indeed looking for an extension of the fictional universe of *Fables* in the entire corpus.

I have analyzed the number of works belonging to *Fables*' ensemble each participant has consumed, based on the seven elements belonging to the transmedia corpus of *Fables* (*Fables*, *The Wolf Among Us*, *The Wolf Among Us* comics, *Jack of Fables*, *Cinderella*, *Fairest* and *Peter and Max*). Table 2 shows that most participants consumed 4 or more works belonging to the transmedia corpus (66%). In addition, the high percentage of readers/players who have read or played 6 elements of the franchise instead of 7 is explained by the fact that most have either played the video game *The Wolf Among Us* or read the comic book series, but rarely both. This engagement with multiple elements of the franchise supports Jenkins' hypothesis of a transmedia consumer who seeks to extend their narrative experience across different media platforms.

4. Conclusion

This study confirms the existence of a committed transmedia consumer as theorized by Jenkins, particularly within the *Fables* franchise. While the survey participants were likely more engaged due to their recruitment via social media and direct connections to the author, their responses reveal a pattern of deep investment in the narrative universe

across multiple media. The majority of respondents have consumed several elements of the *Fables* transmedia ensemble, with many expressing a desire for further expansion of this universe. The findings suggest that transmedia storytelling, especially when anchored in familiar cultural narratives like fairytales, encourages consumers to engage with and explore the narrative across various platforms, thereby deepening their overall experience and understanding of the fictional universe. Future research could build on this study by utilizing natural language processing (NLP) to analyze participants' responses to track references to specific story elements to reveal which aspects drive transmedia engagement.

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Appendix A. List and type of survey questions

Question	Answer
How old are you?	Textbox
Gender	Male, Female, Non-binary
How frequently do you read comics?	Rarely (less than once a month); Frequently (several times a month); Most of the time (almost every day)
How frequently do you play video games?	Rarely (less than once a month); Frequently (several times a month); Most of the time (almost every day)
Have you read Fables? If yes, did you finish it? If not, which volume did you stop at and why?	Textbox
Have you played The Wolf Among Us?	Yes, No
Have you read The Wolf Among Us comic books?	Yes, No
Have you read Jack of Fables?	Yes, No
Have you read Fairest?	Yes, No
Have you read Cinderella (The Fables' spin-off)?	Yes, No
Have you read Peter and Max?	Yes, No
How did you discover the comics series and/or the videogame? Did reading the comics/playing the video game make you want to read/play the other one? Why? Which one did you start with?	Textbox
Are you aware that Fables' fictional universe is present on different media? How do you conceive of the relationship between Fables and its spin-offs and adaptation to videogames?	Textbox
What did you like the most about Fables / The Wolf Among Us?	Textbox