THIS IS NOT A BOOK: TRANSMEDIA TRIUMPHS AND TROPES

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This Is Not a Book: Transmedia Triumphs and Tropes

What it means to be a book is changing. The centuries-long concept of a single bound text containing an island of discreet content encompassed between two covers no longer describes everything people use the word book to describe. A book can be an audio recording on your MP3 player. A book can be a digital file on your e-book reader. A book can be a series of posts on a Web site. A book can be all these things at the same time. The word “book” has a profound new dualism, meaning both the physical object that's proven so resilient, and a discrete set of content that exists as a meme in its own right, beyond any particular physical manifestation.

It is no wonder then that as the media through which books express themselves become fluid, the delineation of where the stories begin and end can become fuzzy too. Books have long contained more than just words, with illustrations being a literary staple since the earliest illuminated manuscripts. Illustrated novels, comic books, and even coloring books have integrated prose and image countless times, adding a new perspective to and changing the experience of a text. With new media opportunities and novel means for conveying story available to modern authors, including video production and especially Internet-based content, the possibilities for what a book is have grown fuzzier than ever before.

In 2009 three titles were published that experimented in very different ways with traditional forms of the book: Instructions for the Apocalypse by Rod Sweet and Tim Williams, Level 26 by Anthony Zuiker and Duane Swiercynski, and Personal Effects: Dark Art by J.C. Hutchins and Jordan Weisman. Each book plays with a mixture of
illustration, re-contextualization, and, in the latter two, digital content to offer readers unique cognitive experiences that would be impossible with prose alone. Projects taking advantage of this multi-media approach are sometimes referred to as transmedia. Media professor and transmedia expert Henry Jenkins uses this definition of the word in his classes:

“Transmedia storytelling represents a 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 the story. So, for example, in *The Matrix* franchise, key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *Matrix* universe.”

Although only *Personal Effects* self-identifies as a transmedia novel, all three fit into the spectrum encompassed by the term and each is an example of a different degree of transmedia experience.

In many ways, *Instructions for the Apocalypse*, written by Rod Sweet and
illustrated by Tim Williams, is within the long tradition of illustrated books. Unlike the titles discussed below, there is no additional digital or other media content; the whole experience is contained between the bound covers. What it does have in common with the other titles under discussion is that the book itself is presented as an actual physical artifact of a fictional event, in this case a kind of catalog for a museum exhibition. Or at least the book can be viewed as such. Instructions for the Apocalypse is itself a bit of a puzzle, with the reader being thrown in without explanation to what look like print-outs of an e-mail conversation followed by a newspaper article from the Mercury-Sentinel titled “Eco-prof's daughter tries to halt 'cynical' exhibition” (Sweet 8-12).

Through this article we're introduced to the book's central character, Gareth Gray, a man we will know only through the objects and words he has left for his daughter. The article goes on to describe the contents of this controversial exhibition:

“The photographs include many taken by Prof Gray's industrialist grandfather Emrys. This is believed to be a rare collection depicting day to day life of the emergent middle class at the turn of the last century. It is not known what the audio recordings contain but Prof Stephen Currie, head of the geography department and a former colleague of Gray's said: 'They offer an extraordinary insight into the mind of one of the most original thinkers this country as seen in the last 40 or 50 years’” (Sweet 10).

This article sets the stage for the rest of the book, which may or may not be the exhibit mentioned in the text. It tells us how to view the pictures and also why they're
important – something that makes their strangeness all the more compelling as we move forward. We know Gray was controversial because not only is the subject news-worthy, but it is something his daughter is willing to go to court over. We never get any resolution to that law suit, but we know that whether she won or lost, we're privileged enough to be seeing the object of such vehement disagreement.

What follows is essentially a collage of text and images, most of which were chosen rather than created for the book. They are described on the back of the book (the only place where their origin is definitively explained) as “Found photographs illustrate the fictional account of one man's descent into madness” (Sweet back cover). Sweet and Williams have taken real, non-fictional images, mostly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and given them a purely fictional context. On top of that, they have taken the fictional context and then placed it within the structure of an art exhibition, with limited explanatory text. They have re-made the message of their imagery but then left it up to the reader to give their own interpretation of what we see and read. The authentic and obvious age of the pictures is vital to the book's success and would have been incredibly difficult to recreate if the authors had to make them from scratch.

One image that works very well is a photo of a large group of college students dated to 1963 (Sweet 30-31). The text identifies Gray as being in the picture, but not which one. We've already seen another photo from this era that was identified as Gray, and the group picture features enough young men that look the same that it's entirely believable he is among them. Or he might not be. The result is a nice puzzle that grounds the central character in reality and gives the story a sense of temporal scope.

Sometimes though, Sweet's artistic layouts add both confusion and interest
simultaneously. Pages 24 and 25 present an artfully manipulated photo of a forked tree and a reclining figure on one side and a copy of the picture on the facing page, the outline of a man's head and neck replaced with a red silhouette. It's artistically interesting but narratively confusing. Are we meant to think that Gray did it or the exhibition did it or is it unique to this book? The lack of explanation makes for an interesting puzzle, but it's also easy to dismiss it as simply the artist/curator experimenting, because elsewhere he creates images that definitely have no corollary with Gray's “actual” artifacts. For example, on page 50 there is an image of a VW Bug in profile repeated four times, each turned a different orientation like the ticking of a clock. With no explanation of the cars and no indication in the text that Gray ascribes meaning to them or their orientation, these come across as filler imagery rather than something that gives insight into Gray's madness.

*Instructions for the Apocalypse* hits one terrific high note, a moment that justifies the entire experiment in many ways. The text represents transcripts of audio recordings and writings that Gray left for his daughter. He envisions a collapsing civilization and wants his daughter to have the tools to rebuild a stable, if very strange society in the post-apocalyptic world. Gray, in a cutting critique of religion, offers a reason he's giving her all these old photos:

“Now. I've thought about this. You're going to need a religion. They will come in very handy. That's where the pictures come in... How about this. Once every two years it's the big ceremony. The tribe can pass through the chamber and gaze upon the faces of the blessed ancestors and receive their blessings. The ancestors reach
through the pictures with their energy and retune your souls...” (Sweet 74)

These words are juxtaposed with picture of an ancient looking couple in dour, formal clothing standing in front of a brick building. It is reminiscent of the painting “American Gothic” in many ways. This one moment, recasts the entire book in an interesting way and lets the reader carry out an intriguing thought experiment. What kind of religion would spring from a faith that the book in your hands was a holy text? With so little context even in this book, it's easy to ignore Gray's words and focus on the weirdness and mundanity of the imagery. How would a half-starved apocalypse-survivor view these dour, ancient men and women? Their stiff dignity certainly does reek of authority.

It's the most striking moment in the book, and it is well-timed, coming about halfway through. Presented at the beginning, this interpretation might have seemed forced or even ridiculous. But we've had scores of pages of Grays increasingly paranoid concerns about the end of civilization. Even if we think he's mad, it's impossible not to be swept up in his vision to at least some degree. At that point it does seem a sort of ingenious plan and provides the reader with a nice “ah-ha!” moment that is sorely needed.

Ultimately, Instructions for the Apocalypse gets a little lost in its own pretension. The graphic design becomes “interesting” for its own sake and ends up confounding the enigmatic text as much as it adds to it. As an example of transmedia however, it offers a useful example about how to play with context and image. Unlike the other two books discussed below, this text carried a relatively low production cost. The use of found images on their own presents some serious restrictions, but the religion re-
contextualization moment shows just how effective the right text with even the most ordinary image can be. It's easy to imagine numerous compelling stories being told using just free and public domain artwork. This book serves as a useful case study for any author interested in incorporating some transmedia elements into their fiction.

_**Level 26: Dark Origins**_ by Anthony Zuiker and Duane Swiercynski is billed on its cover and promotional copy as “the first Digi-Novel,” a new mixed media storytelling format that Zuiker seems to have created, but which can also be found in Simon and Schuster's Vooks. _Level 26_ combines text and illustrations with fully acted and scripted video segments, which the text refers to as cyber-bridges. Zuiker is most famous as the creator and executive producer of the popular _CSI_ television franchises, and _Level 26_ as a crime story and as a film project shares a lot with its televised fore-bearers. The novel centers upon the hunt for the world's most dangerous serial killer, a mysterious contortionist named Sqweegel who has killed hundreds and eluded capture for decades. Only one person has ever come close to finding him, former FBI agent Steven Dark, but his failure and Sqweegel's murdering his family have driven him into retirement. Of course he gets dragged back into the investigation and the book ultimately resolves (after a great many distractions and diversions) into a confrontation between the two men.

The cyber-bridges are, for the most part, short two to five minute movies featuring a full cast of actors, shot with professional skill and traditional film and television production standards. The cast includes some recognizable actors such as
Michael Ironside in the role of Riggins, Dark's old boss and friend at the FBI. A few of the cyber-bridges are not videos, but either audio recording or simulated text messages.

There are three ways to purchase the text of *Level 26*. There is a standard print version, an e-book version, and an iPhone app version. The prose is identical in all three versions, but there is a huge difference in how the reader interacts with the video sequences. In the print and e-book versions, readers are given simple passwords when they come to the section of the book where they should view a cyber-bridge. They're instructed to log onto the *Level 26* Web Site (www.level26.com) and enter the password. This will unlock the cyber-bridge for viewing. The password system prevents readers from skipping ahead to other videos or accidentally seeing something that might spoil upcoming plot twists. By contrast, the iPhone app version of *Level 26* integrates the cyber-bridges right into the text, unlocking them naturally as the reader comes upon them.

Although I've read the e-book and iPhone versions of *Level 26*, I will here focus almost exclusively on the iPhone version, except for the following analysis. Requiring a reader to go to a computer every time they come upon one of the cyber-bridges produces a serious barrier to having an optimal reading experience. In order to read the book as intended, you must always have an Internet-connected computer close at hand. It makes bed-time reading undesirable, as well as beach reading, library reading, and anyone without a laptop will find themselves even more constricted in their options. With web-enabled phones, viewing the cyber-bridges becomes more reasonable, but even there it requires a robust browser and data plan to use the Level26.com site at a speed that doesn't seem to onerously impede one's reading time. The disconnect between text medium and
digital material medium requires an added commitment from the reader, which in turn means the story and additional content need to be all the more compelling. In my opinion, both the story and content of *Level 26* are sub-par, and as a casual reader I would have given up on the book before finishing it in e-book form.

The iPhone app, however, works well. Every page flip is accompanied by a deep, ominous tone, while there's a swishing noise when you turn back a page. It's a needless affectation, easily avoided by turning down the volume except during the video segments. I will also note briefly that many (but not all) of the chapters open with an illustration by Mark Ecko, all of them in black and white and surreal or impressionistic in style. They allude to scenes or ideas in the story without illustrating exact events from the book, but are otherwise standard book illustrations and not subject to further analysis here.

With the raised barrier to entry in print and e-book editions and the no-doubt significant added cost of producing the videos, *Level 26* succeeds or fails on how well it integrates those cyber-bridges into the larger tale. With no real precedent to guide them in the “digi-novel” space, Zuiker (who wrote and directed the video sequences) was free to experiment with the form. Unfortunately, for the most part he simply inserts brief moments of for-TV style content into his novel, passing up opportunities to make the videos feel like part of the written word rather than separate from it.

The very first video sequence exemplifies the advantages of and problems with the way Zuiker decided to create. We're introduced to the poorly-named Sqweegel (has any serial killer had a less ominous moniker?), who is in his secret lair perusing his collection of 8mm films, all made during his various murders. “No fancy digital disc, or even video: Nothing beat the raw rush of images on film, speeding by at twenty-four
frames per second” (Zuiker 49). We get no description of the film's contents, but we do get Sqweegel's reaction to it as he masturbates while viewing. “He hadn't watched this one in a while. He'd forgotten how good it was. He'd forgotten what her insides had looked like” (Zuiker 49). Expectations for something gruesome are set in the readers mind. “The film countdown flickered across the screen: 10, 9, 8...” (50).

The video we see is creepy, beginning with a steel door with “Kill Room” stenciled on it, but it is also clearly not shot on 8mm film. The camera indulges in a slow track through chambers that are both dark and well lit in the way only a movie set ever is. The door opens on its own for the camera to move through. Evocative close ups of Sqweegel's poor female victim follow, and as he menaces her we get occasional cuts to his point of view, which are in grainy, shaky black and white. But we see Sqweegel in full frame, and he's clearly not holding a camera. Indeed there's no camera in any shot. Despite the evocative set-up in the prose, it is clear that the video we are watching is not in any way the same as the film Sqweegel is watching.

This is a lost opportunity, one Level 26 fails to capitalize upon again and again. The text describes a very specific media sequence and we are then given a Hollywood, carefully constructed version of those events rather the actual media alluded to in the text. We go from a close point of view inside the killer's head to an artificially removed, filmic point of view. We go from experiencing the killer to just watching him from a distance. This and most of the other sequences would have been much more effective if they'd been presented as the actual media artifacts from within the story and had been created in a way to simulate an amateur, hand-held film shot by the killer himself.

The fourth cyber-bridge (after Chapter 18) makes the same mistake. Steven Dark,
the hero, has been given a thumb drive with one of Sqweegel's attacks on it. The scene starts with Dark at his computer, plugging in the memory device and the camera closes in on the screen. But the scene we see cannot be something Sqweegel himself generated – it is full of angles and shots that he couldn't have created himself and there is no camera in evidence. Furthermore the action in the video (which has Sqweegel inexplicably removing his suit) does not match with what Dark says when he later describes the scene to Riggins. Here instead of adding to the viewers experience, *Level 26* again frustrates and confuses. In order for transmedia elements like these cyber-bridges to work, they need to integrate as seamlessly as possible into the prose, not contradict it.

What does work is Sqweegel himself. He wears a white latex or rubber body suit that covers him from head to toe, leaving only his eyes exposed and nostrils exposed. He even has a zipper over his mouth. The actor, Daniel Browning Smith, is rail thin, very skilled contortionist and his physical performance raises the video segments to truly weird and sometimes terrifying levels. For example, he's at his creepiest and most effective in Cyber-Bridge 6, where he's sneaking into the house where Dark's pregnant wife is sleeping. He sucks in his emaciated stomach, and then does a bizarre crawl where his legs swing up past his shoulders to take a step – I find it impossible to describe accurately, which makes it perfect for video. Weirdly, the scene incorporates the fact that there's a security camera in the house, and eventually Dark will watch this video, but we only see more crafted and carefully shot moments instead of showing us what was caught on the security camera.

Time and again, the book sets up instances where characters are viewing media that seem like ideal opportunities to recreate those fictional experiences for the
reader/viewer. Riggins muses about how Sqweegel taunts law enforcement. “This, too, was how Sqweegel operated. Telling his own tale out of Chronological order. The handwritten notes and evidence and audiotapes and – in this case – films were selected and sent in a sequence that meant something to Sqweegel” (Zuiker 80). It would be great to see some of those. At the book's climax, after Sqweegel has kidnapped Dark's wife and forced her to give birth, he sees. “A video image filled the browser screen. A live, sky Webcam image.” (Zuiker 831-832). If only we'd seen something like this instead of the over-produced and melodramatic scenes we do get.

But Level 26 does offer a few other successful moments aside from Daniel Browning Smith's portrayal of Sqweegel. Cyber-bridge 7 is the most successful of the bunch, particularly when reading the book on your iPhone or iPod touch. The event takes place after Chapter 37 and coincides with Dark receiving a call on his cell phone. The device you're reading on pops up a screen designed to look like an incoming call notification. On the top it says “Sqweegel calling” and has simulated touch screen buttons for contacts, keypad, etc. along with a big red End Call button. In his gravelly, serial killer voice, Sqweegel narrates a nursery-rhyme style poem that becomes central to the book's remaining plot.

Viewing this message on-line is less compelling by far, although still effective, but having the device in your hand speak to you in a manner it's normally used for is quite effective. For that brief moment the reader can imagine themselves receiving the macabre poem in the exact manner that Dark does and so we are drawn into the story just that little bit more. On the computer, it would have been better if they'd changed it to an e-mail or instant message, but it still retains the added frisson of feeling like an element
of the fictional world reaching out into our own. Sadly, it is one of the rare occasions where *Level 26* takes advantage of this technique.

Zuiker’s Digi-Novel fails as a model transmedia experiment because it fails to find the best ways for text and video to interact. Instead of striving to seamlessly meld the two together, he gives the reader media whiplash by jumping back and forth between two very different storytelling methods. The videos are well-produced on their basic merits, but they don't come close to film or television quality levels. By making them mini-movies, Zuiker invites comparison to better executed spectacles, including his own *CSI* programs. Leaving aside any considerations of the prose’s actual quality, even if it were the best written thriller on the market, these cyber-bridges would distract and trip up readers more often than they'll ever add to the experience.

My analysis concludes that *Level 26* is an example of reaching in the wrong direction for transmedia elements. What works best are moments like the voice mail from Sqweegel, which breathe new life into the fictional world so that it brushes up against our personal experiences in the real world. The videos add a little value to the iPhone version and are a disincentive to reading the print and e-book version. In order for transmedia elements to work best, they need to more fully integrate fiction and reality for the reader so that they add to immersiveness rather detract from it. They need to be more like *Personal Effects: Dark Art*.

First and foremost *Personal Effects: Dark Art* by J.C. Hutchins and Jordan
Weisman is a novel which can be read from front to back without any reference to the other media streams. It tells the story of an art therapist named Zach Taylor working in a mental hospital. Over the course of the story, Zach becomes embroiled in the mystery of blind man who is accused of committing multiple murders, but which we're led to suspect might well have a supernatural cause.

It works perfectly well as a thriller on its own, and readers who experience only the printed and bound text get a satisfying story. But by delving into the other streams and puzzling through the clues therein readers can discover new aspects to the story and additional background about the characters. Dig in even more, using clues from multiple media streams, and a tenacious reader can find an alternate account of the book's events that fundamentally change the meaning of the book's climax. In other words, the story a reader experiences ultimately depends on their own inquisitiveness and ability to sort out the book's puzzles (or look up answers on-line).

Bound with the print version of the book is a pocket full of "artifacts," These include drivers' licenses, business cards, personal letters, birth certificates, photographs, and other documents, all created by the publishers to be as realistic as possible. At first glance most of these items have no obvious meaning, but in the process of reading the book they are mentioned specifically in the text. The reader can then reference them to find new clues or insight or just to further flesh out the larger story.

*Personal Effects* also incorporates over a dozen dedicated Web sites, ranging from the protagonist's MySpace page to his girlfriend's video-game blog to secret government sites that can only be accessed via passwords. Here again we find additional story elements not found elsewhere, including the alternate (or "real") ending. Finally, there are
phone numbers scattered throughout the printed text, artifacts, and Web sites. Readers can phone these numbers to hear recorded messages from the book’s characters. In many cases there are clues providing the password for these voice mail accounts, allowing investigative readers to listen to the messages and thus gain further insight into the story.

*Personal Effects: Dark Arts* is almost the platonic ideal of what a transmedia novel can be, incorporating multiple media formats and an open ended story that obligates the reader to dig for hidden meaning. Much of what makes *Personal Effects* so successful stems from the fact that it builds upon storytelling techniques that have already proven themselves in Alternative Reality Gaming. Alternative Reality Games (ARGs) are a recent phenomenon that owe their existence to the Web. They are fictional events presented as real world events. For example, a Web site associated with an ARG will have no direct indication that it is fictional in any way. ARGology.org, site run by the International Game Development Association offers this definition:

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) tell stories through narrative elements that are distributed across various platforms. These game variables are carefully concealed from players until appropriate moments determined by the game designer(s). Game play involves players working collaboratively through email, phone/sms contact, real-time interactions and extensive online engagement. Players generally react to narrative cues that are projected across numerous forms of media. These include media technologies that are not traditionally associated with games that, unlike ARGs, rely on a single platform for communication (eg console games). In doing so, ARGs make
players step outside the restrictions of mono-genre game boundaries.

Instead of requiring the player to enter a fictional game world, ARG designers attempt to enmesh the game within the fabric of the player’s real world by harnessing as many media technologies and interfaces as possible. By doing so, ARGs expand the frame for the game beyond the computer monitor or television screen, effectively making the entire world the “game board.

This second paragraph describes a quality much sought-after in both ARGs and within *Personal Effects*: the illusion of “This Is Not A Game.” This is not a game is shorthand for the idea that any given piece of the story is as indistinguishable from an analogous real world phenomenon of the same type. For example, a Web site for a psychiatric hospital that is part of the game or story is presented as an entirely legitimate Web site, with no indication that it is actually a fictional creation. Out of the context of the greater story, it seems real.

Author J. C. Hutchins discussed *Personal Effects* during a phone interview with me in August, 2009. Asked to define what a transmedia story is, he said,

“It's not multi-media nor really cross-media (ARG's are like cross media). Transmedia is a story that uses multiple media in a cohesive narrative in which an unfolding story uses these media in resonant ways – and communication tools (email, sites, phone) in a way to engage the reader in emotionally resonant ways and wherever possible blur the line between fiction and reality in such a way that
the audience is not a passive but rather an active participant in the story. They go beyond the main media (the book) and in doing so are engaging in other elements of the story in other ways makes that experience true or real that in a way reading a typical book wouldn't."

Hutchins distinguishes between providing extra content on-line, what he calls “bling,” which doesn't evoke the sought-after “this is not a game” experience in the reader. Character biographies or art on-line are more enhancements than integral to the whole story experience. He explained that in order for it to work, transmedia must be conceived from the ground up as a multiple media experience where the story unfolds. Although he works in prose, he doesn't want to give one media preferential treatment in this definition – a film or audio play or anything else as could serve as the primary media.

Although transmedia storytelling has its roots in Alternative Reality Games, there is an important difference. ARGs unfold in real time and are only meant to last for a short, set period during which time participants all over the world cooperate to solve the game's puzzles. “Personal Effects does not unfold in real time,” explained Hutchins. “It's more like an ant in amber. It will always be the same experience – those phone numbers will always work. It doesn't require the group think of a massive ARG.” Creating a work this complicated that felt both real in the moment and yet remained ready for any new reader to find at any time “was a challenge” that made creating it much more elaborate than writing a traditional novel.

On top of the already complicated on-line elements, Personal Effects also comes with a packet of what Hutchins refers to as “artifacts,” physical items pulled from the
fictional reality of the novel into our world. “The tangibility of the artifacts distinguishes it from other transmedia – the only one on the market. It's kind of old school seeming, but in a world with digital distribution, you have this real analog experience that can't be had any other way. In that tangibility is a reality – what truly sells the alternate reality” (Hutchins).

One of the greatest challenges is teaching the readers how to engage all this other material. Most people don't come to a book with the expectation of looking things up online or having a packet of documents to deal with. “A rulebook would blow everything – kill the illusion.” Hutchins and Weisman strove to figure out organic ways to funnel players into the other content via clues in the text and artifacts. They studied ARGs closely to see how those games did it, but ultimately it's hard to know how well they succeeded. Every reader will come to the story in a different way, which is both the blessing and the curse of transmedia storytelling.

“As Jordan [Weisman] and I were hashing out the plot, one of the things we stumbled upon was the reader being far wiser than Zach Taylor was. The reader encounters information that gives a whole different context to the novel.” For example, there is a whole web site devoted to the Taylor family geneology that the character Zach Taylor seems largely unaware of. The site www.taylorfamilygenealogy.org, details a lost line of Taylors and suggests that Zach might be related to the former U.S. President. As we'll see, there's an entire ending to the story that the hero never becomes aware of, but which readers can discover on their own.

Although future books in the series depend on sales of this first one, Hutchins and Weisman are using these added layers of depth to lay the groundwork for future stories.
For example, Zach Taylor's uncle, Harry, makes a brief appearance in the novel to give Zach some important motivation. Included in the artifacts is Harry's rap sheet, detailing a lifetime of criminal activities. Closely examining the crimes, a reader sees that all of them have something to do with the occult. “We're building a series long arc for Henry Deacon Taylor,” explained Hutchins. “We want you to be able to look back from the third book and see things like Henry's criminal record.” But even in this one book, these extra details and leads serve an important role. “Not only is reader having a fuller experience, they sense something bigger is going on and that these things wouldn't be included unless it was important” (Hutchins).

The book's biggest secret is one most readers will never find. Even though I was doing a very close reading, trying to follow up on every lead, I missed the final clue needed to unlock it. The artifacts include both an insurance card and a business card from an insurance agent, each from a different company. The character who presents his business card to Zach in the story arouses suspicion, and since his company doesn't match the original insurance card, astute readers have reason to believe he's lying. Both companies have web sites associated with them. What I did not realize is that, as Hutchins said, “based on the conversation with Zach and the Insurance Agent, you have the info you need to hack into his account. Then if you do that, you're whisked into a deeper layer of the site – on face value it's just 'bling' but if you assemble pieces from the novel and get the password then your curiosity is rewarded with a very illuminating experience that changes the story for you in an interesting way.”

Finding this secret CIA site reveals that Russian operatives are actually responsible for the murders that are central to the book's plot. They framed the book's
chief suspect, Drake, for the killings (it makes sense in context). As Hutchins pointed out, “In the book, Rachael and Zach talking about Russians can be seen as just background Macguffin – the grout between the tiles to get us to the next thing. But in fact it's all really important, but the only way to make that connection is to either be told or put it together through the out of book experience.” This is a radical re-interpretation of the book's finale, which based on the text alone veers into the supernatural as the ultimate cause. Just reading the printed text leads one to believe the murders were performed by a figure Zach calls The Dark Man, while in fact the truth is that it was Russian hit-men all along.

Since the book is written from Zach's point of view, this literary shell game can work. Hutchins said, “Zach is severely afraid of the dark – and we're in his head so he's an unreliable narrator. The Anti-Zach personality is in there. Zach is far more broken than he knows. This book is so much neater than people know.” Hutchins claimed that he enjoys the fact that not a lot of people are getting this final, super secret. As an author, he appreciates the fun of explaining the twist personally. On the other hand, he's a little frustrated that not many people are finding the “true” ending, but in the same breath he's quite satisfied with the core book as it stands on its own. In the interview, Hutchins summarized his feelings:

The same kind of emotional impact can be achieved through a single narrative media – like the traditional novel. There's all kind of complexity and layers. Literature! But can you really think of any kind of narrative that has been juggling so many plates and the same story after acquiring the content instead of being
given to you? You have to do a physical act to gather the narrative unto you.

Accessing the added experiences is all an opt in experience for the reader. They have to go out and get it and it can change everything. Even informally knowing there's a world wider out there is interesting. But you may never know it's far deeper than you expect. There's great promise for this kind of storytelling. Great promise for the future of it all.

Creating a network of fictional characters that appear to have real world lives provides unique opportunities and challenges to the transmedia writer. Zach's girlfriend Rachael is one of the book's main characters, a newspaper reporter who also blogs about video games under the name PixelVixen707. As part of their groundwork, the creators of Personal Effects set up PixelVixen707's blog well in advance of the book's release, hiring an outside writer (who remains anonymous to this day) to create video game-related content. As it turned out, because of delays in publishing the text, PixelVixen707's writing became a source of mild controversy.

The delay in publication from 2008 to 2009 meant that, according to Hutchins, PixelVixen707's blogging had been going on for nearly a year before the book's release. The writer posing as Rachael had been producing quality video game analysis and reviews and “she” ended up engaging directly with a number of other video game bloggers, including asking for links from other bloggers. Hutchins noted in the interview:

Throughout all these things there were little tells. We made every single attempt to wink and nod and nudge and elbow to clue the “norms” into what was going
on. We tried to get them into the idea – just click the About Page. We weren't trying to perpetuate a hoax – but people reacted like it was a hoax. There was notable outrage when the truth was revealed, as people thought they'd been used. But Hutchins believes most people accepted the ruse because PixelVixen707 never broke character:

They realized that Rachael never mentioned the book or St. Martin's Press – she was always true to her persona and was being absolutely the same and genuine as she can be. People began to realize that the only thing that doesn't make this person real is that she doesn't have bones. No difference with relationships you have with other people you know on-line but will never meet. She was actually real in a very special way.

One of the areas where Hutchins and Weisman ran into the most difficulty was casting live humans for the characters. These casting decisions were out of Hutchins's control, but he did have to re-write the text. For example, with Zach, Hutchins says that “originally his bangs were long and would fall into his face. In first draft he had nervous tic and would swipe bangs out of his face. When they found the model, he had really short hair, so I had to go back and change all that.” This is a minor change, although Hutchins expressed his gratitude that they never cast Rachael, leaving her appearance to the reader's imagination.

But one of the least successful moments comes with a set of pictures found in the artifacts packet. They are old family photos that have been defaced with a ballpoint pen. In the book, when Zach sees them he describes them in very dramatic terms: “It had been a person once...But she wasn't a person anymore. She was a ghoul. A furious tangle of
black lines covered her eyes and mouth, unholy and inhuman-worse than a scream, worse than wide-eyed terror. She was howling” (Hutchins 153). Hutchins admitted that the photos included, “didn't come out scary.” It's actually hard to imagine how any real-life photo could have such an effect on casual readers. Looking at the photo, it's just an old picture that someone has scribbled on with a pen and it has no intrinsic horror to it. Reading just the text, we would naturally accept Zach's analysis, but with the evidence before our own eyes, we can't help but think he's over-reacting. It is one of the rare missteps in Personal Effects.

But Personal Effects succeeds much more than it fails, largely because it embraces the “This Is Not A Game” aesthetic from ARGs. At every turn it seeks to bring the false reality of the fiction into the real world of the reader. With verisimilitude as its goal, it actually transforms the reading experience. Unlike Level 26, where the videos feel forced and sub-par, here if anything the actual bound book is the largest barrier to the whole thing feeling real. But readers are so comfortable with books as storytelling mediums that even its artificiality becomes largely transparent.

A pitfall associated with trying to create realistic supplemental content is that failure to live up to real-world standards can distract from the story as much as it adds to it. Most of the Web sites for the book match or exceed expectations: PixelVixen707's blog and its long-running history of posts is a triumph, and the site for Zach's place of work, www.brinkvalepsychiatric.com, looks very professional. In a nice touch of interactivity, this site includes a large gallery of “patient art,” supposedly created by Zach's art therapy patients. In fact these were solicited by Hutchins from his fan base, who got the thrill of seeing their art as part of the larger project, while the Brinkvale site
benefits from a wide variety of art styles. On the other hand, the Web site for Rachael's employer, [www.newyorkjournalledger.com](http://www.newyorkjournalledger.com), only contains enough content to be relevant to the novel, with a few extra news stories scattered in for flavor. It's not really believable as the site for a newspaper, even though the content serves the book's clue-hunting game admirably.

The biggest obstacle for readers really enjoying *Personal Effects* remains its reliance on an internet connected computer for so much of its content. Like the print and e-book versions of *Level 26*, it can be very disruptive to have to go over to the computer to look something up. Unlike *Level 26*, there is not the immediate need to see the digital content right away, as it is always a new avenue to investigate rather than a dramatization of the main plot. Even the artifacts, which are stored within the book's binding, require the reader to have space to sort through them and find the right piece at the right time. Casual reading on the beach or train is pretty much ruled out.

Leaving aside the artifacts, which while fascinating are unusual and difficult to produce and therefore won't be an option for most authors, *Personal Effects* would work wonderfully on an integrated reader and internet capable device. Unlike *Level 26*, there is no iPod app version of the book, but one would work well. Even better would be an e-book version integrated with a web-capable reader like the Apple iPad or some other slate technology. On such a device the author could present the core narrative as a series of Web posts or an on-line document, adding to the This is Not a Game sensibility even more than a printed book can achieve. The traditional trappings of the word “book” could disappear entirely, dispersed into a cloud of sites, documents, videos, and other media that come together to form a complete and uniquely compelling narrative.
Instructions for the *Apocalypse* and *Level 26* could both have benefited from the lessons learned in ARG development, as *Personal Effects* did. In the former case, the book would have been even more powerful if it had fully embraced the concept that it was simply the catalog for an art exhibition. This added level of context and constraint might have reeled in the artist's more indulgent decisions and would add the weight of reality to the mad ramblings of Prof. Gray. *Level 26*, as written, seemed poised to move in this direction. There are numerous references to film shot by the killer, security cam footage, web cam streams, and other documents. Had the creators seized on these opportunities, their videos might have become truly engaging instead of mostly ridiculous.

Not every novel would benefit from a transmedia treatment. It's probably safe to say that, in fact, very few novels would. The example of *Personal Effects* shows that transmedia elements work best when they are integrated into the very fiber of the story from its inception. *Level 26* shows that thoughtlessly trying to force disparate media modes together can actually be counterproductive. But with mobile devices becoming all-pervasive and the tools for generating digital content easier and cheaper, opportunities abound for authors interested in pushing the limits of what we can call a “book.”
“What is an ARG?” ARColgy.org. Web. Day Month Year of Access


Hutchins, J.C. Personal Interview. 29 August 2009.
