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By CultureWork, on January 20th, 2012

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Transcending the Music Festival: A Look into an Adoption of Transmedia

[Alyssa Fisher](#)

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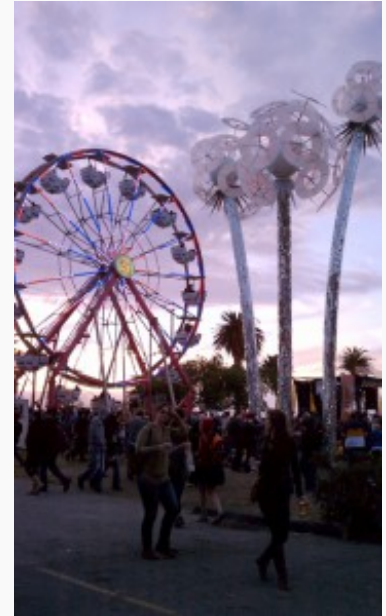
Introduction and Background

This article documents and explores the emerging trend of music festivals that are incorporating transmedia narratives into their programming. I will provide an overview and documentation of three case study festivals: Midpoint Music Festival in Cincinnati, Ohio, Treasure Island Music Festival, in San Francisco, California, and South by Southwest, a music, film and interactive media festival in Austin, Texas, the trends that emerge among them, and the place of a transmedia festival in a wider culture of media-consumer interaction.

As media becomes more personal and interactive, it plays an increasingly constant role in

our lives. A greater level of accessibility to multiple mediums has created a more technologically savvy world, where the general populous knows how to engage with and operate technology ranging from smart phones to self scanners at the grocery store with ease and even an intrinsic ability. This allows for information to be shared on several levels, through a variety of mediums and at different points of depth. With this wider range of synonymous data, media producers have been able to supplement mainstream content, like film, with alternative content, such as viral Internet videos, websites with exclusive photograph and interview content, and products such as books, magazines, and director's notebooks.

Henry Jenkins initially coined the term Transmedia for this change in consumer culture, and explains in his book, *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*, that the content itself can also come from the audience, as they use a film, book, or video game to tell their own stories and create communities that surround the media (Jenkins, 2008, p.288). Key components to transmedia are the ideas of unique content and new media building upon old as they redefine the experience of each other, as Richard Coyne points out in his book *The tuning of place*. Coyne explains that each medium, and the content produced for them, "interact and influence one another," creating a conversation where transmedia storytelling can take place (Coyne, 2010, p. xxii).



2010 Treasure Island Music Festival: Photo of the ferris wheel and one of the art installations, called Wish by Robert Buchholz, was also featured at Burning Man 2010 and Coachella 2011. The ferris wheel is a yearly tradition at TIMF was also used as a social experiment for "video confessionals" where attendees could tell a secret to a video camera while riding the ferris wheel. This portion of the festival was sponsored by The Bay Bridged. Photo by Alyssa Fisher

In this article, I explore how festivals are using transmedia to move beyond passive listening ears to engage audiences to take part in activities such as murals and private dance parties, and ways in which they are able to financially support these new ventures. Some programming trends that arise include social media integration, digital documentation and sharing on the Internet, art installations, and interactive media elements during the festival. Financial support often comes from corporate sponsors looking to reach a new target audience, and larger umbrella organizations who run the festivals. The study of these trends and the music festivals that are leading them reveals a new way to festival through transmedia integration and audience engagement. A transmedia narrative is especially intriguing when combined with music festivals, a leisure activity that, in the past, has been attractive because of the bands who perform, but is becoming increasingly popular for new additions to programming such as film, visual art, and new media.

Music festivals in their current model are often traced back to Woodstock in 1969, and the format did not change much for twenty-five years (<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/woodstock-music-festival-concludes>). A music festival historically meant a group of people gathering together to listen to bands. The move towards transmedia festivals now mixes in the music with experiences of other art and media, often in conjunction and in cooperation with one another. The transmedia festival can be sourced to one of my case studies, South by Southwest, which incorporated film and new media conferences into their music festival in 1994 (<http://sxsw.com/about>). In the next twenty-five years, more festivals, such as Treasure Island Music festival and MidPoint Music Festival, were started, and quickly incorporated transmedia elements into their programming in an effort to broaden their scope, audience, and significance (<http://www.treasureislandmusicfestival.com>; <http://mpmf.com>). Each of these case studies offers a unique use of transmedia: MidPoint uses transmedia to diversify and also bring together its audience, Treasure Island offers unique new media experiences that enhance the isolated island festival, and South by

Southwest has cultivated each strain of its main transmedia to be the leader in each of its three fields: interactive, film, and music. These three case studies point to transmedia as a useful and entertaining new way of the traditional music festival.

Trends

Corporate Sponsorship

Treasure Island Music Festival: Treasure Island Music Festival was approached in 2010 by Vitamin Water, who wanted to host a Silent Disco. Festival goers could enter a separate area of the festival and put on provided headphones to listen to local DJs play music that was broadcast over radio waves to the headphones in the otherwise silent area. The festival's marketing director, Dawson Ludwig, applauded Vitamin Water's initiative, saying, "It was a really great space for it, and just a really great fit [for the festival]...No one says 'silent disco' when they talk to us about it, they say the 'Vitamin Water Silent Disco'" (D. Ludwig, personal communication, April 7, 2011). Corporate sponsored events at music festivals have allowed the opportunity to host transmedia programming without not-for-profits putting out the expense, and has allowed the sponsoring organization to gain brand recognition through an unique experience provided to the audience.

MidPoint Music Festival: Every September, in Cincinnati, Ohio, the MidPoint Music Festival has flourished. The venue-based festival can be overwhelming: in 2010, over 20 venues and 200 bands were showcased. Topic Design, a MidPoint sponsor and creative design agency, set up a tent in one of the outdoor venues that projected the live, map-based Twitter feed of the hashtag for the festival (http://mpmf.com/news/2011/02/15/still_breaking_ground_at_10). From this venue, festival attendees saw what others around them and around the city were tweeting about the festival. TopicDesign's sponsorship set apart the venue as different from the other twenty stages, and the bands that played there as unique from the other 200.

South by Southwest: At South by Southwest, the music, film, and interactive media festival in Austin, Texas, corporate brands sponsored multiple programs of the 2011 festival. Specifically, Microsoft BizMark sponsored the Accelerator competition which featured upcoming products across all film, new media, and music, and used a jury and audience feedback to select the best new products for each media track (<http://sxsw.com/interactive/accelerator>). This event, which is one of a growing number of events open to all badge holders, has united festival goers, and given them something more interactive to attend than the normal showcases, panels, and keynotes.

Umbrella Organizations

Just as corporate sponsorships have given festivals the financial opportunity to expand into transmedia programming, ownership by an umbrella organization has afforded festivals the chance to move beyond music. Umbrella organizations offer the budget to take chances on new programming options, as well as the buy in of customers who will be more willing to try something new based on the brand name of an organization they trust. A larger brand will have the resources and ability to back up a transmedia initiative with padded funding from other successful outlets and to build on the trust of an audience who has attended favorite past events that the brand may have produced. For example, each spring Noise Pop Industries produces the Noise Pop festival, a twenty year San Francisco tradition that has



2010 Treasure Island Music Festival: Photo of the available crafts at the craft tent on the Sunday (second day) of the festival. The craft tent was just one of the ways that attendees could engage while listening to the music playing onstage on the island. Photo by Alyssa Fisher

grown steadily from the start (<http://2012.noisepop.com/>). Treasure Island Music Festival (TIMF) is also part of Noise Pop Industries and is jointly produced by Another Planet Entertainment. The ability to split the costs between two organizations, and a wider volunteer and general audience base has allowed for some ensurance in success for the festival, as well as the ability to include a transmedia narrative into TIMF from the start because of the name branding of Noise Pop. MidPoint Music Festival (MPMF) is owned by *CityBeat*, a weekly paper in Cincinnati, allowing for essentially “free” publicity; and again, a built-in audience base for the festival as well as access to the many organizations that advertise with the newspaper as potential sponsors for the event. South by Southwest (SXSW) is a large enough organization to support itself; but, it also has ties to a weekly newspaper, *The Austin Chronicle*, which is run by two of the co-founders and presidents of SXSW. The twenty-five year tradition of the festival also allows for sponsors to acknowledge the successful brand awareness created during the festival and grow to a larger sponsor relationship, potentially to fund their own transmedia activity. These larger organizations support the music festival as a whole, allowing them to branch out to supplementary transmedia programming through the security they provide.

Social Media Integration

Transmedia programming has extended beyond the time and place of the festival and allowed organizations to create an audience that is not physically present. All three case study festivals use social media integration to sustain community surrounding and during their events. South by Southwest created a social networking site, Sxsocial, to allow attendees to keep up-to-date on performances and other opportunities at the festival, interact with other ticket holders, and create an individualized schedule to share with other audience members (<http://sxsocial.sxsw.com>). Treasure Island Music Festival has applied Facebook integration to announce line ups, receive audience feedback, and, during the off-festival season, announce one-off shows produced by Noise Pop Industries. MidPoint has also used Facebook during the off season to announce one-off shows and to build audience interest in the festival. In addition, Midpoint has an interactive schedule on their website so that attendees can work their way through the many venues and performances over the festival weekend.

During its festival, South by Southwest has used its blog, Event Updates, available through an RSS feed and connected to the main website (sxsw.com) to keep attendees up-to-date on changes in scheduling, weather, and ticket sell-outs. Treasure Island and MidPoint have used similar blogging platforms connected to their websites so that attendees have a quick spot to check for news. The blogs and links to other social media like Twitter have allowed attendees to know happenings before they arrive or while they are at another venue. MidPoint’s Twitter stream, in particular, has kept ticket holders informed about other venues during the festival. These instantly available updates have not only provided information but have dispelled *misinformation* and prevented crowds from gathering and getting frustrated with delayed or sold out shows.

Post-festival, SXSW has a YouTube channel (<http://youtube.com/sxsw>) that collects music performances, interviews, and film trailers; MidPoint has kept a record of their tweets (live.mpmf.com); and, TIMF has uploaded photos to their website (<http://www.treasureislandmusicfestival.com>). These media integrations have continued the community of the festival well beyond the life of the actual festival days, created a documentation of what happened, and built strength in the community that was formed during the events, creating repeat customers. The community aspect of social media integration into transmedia has been a great tool for marketing, information, documentation, and dialogue amongst audiences. A study of these three festivals has confirmed the idea that music festivals have moved beyond the music. Whether it be art installations, film screenings, or Twitter streams, the future of festivals is in an integrated format.

Speculations on Future Trends

In the future, it can be anticipated that music festivals might follow the lead of South by Southwest, and become an all-around media festival, rather than branding themselves as

music-only, when in reality they provide many types of programming. Another trend that will continue is the partnerships between outside organizational and corporate sponsorship of transmedia elements. Organizers and audiences alike can look for new ways to interact with festival programming that will reflect shifts in media usage in the wider culture overall. The ingenuity and creativity that a transmedia narrative allows for will see input from many: technology sectors, festival organizers, outside brands, and the festival attendees.

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Alyssa Fisher is a constantly bridging the arts and new media. She was raised surrounded by visual and performing arts, and found a passion in planning arts events while studying Communication and Media Arts at Gordon College. There, she received her Bachelors of Art and completed research entitled *Podcasting the Future*, in 2008. She then pursued her Masters of Science in Arts Management at the University of Oregon, spending a whirlwind year following her favorite music festivals to find out how they, too, bridge the arts and new media. After completing her research, she received her degree in 2011 and moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she splits her time equally between tweeting and taking in arts of all kinds. For more information on Alyssa, please visit her website at www.alyssafisher.com

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