SUPPORTING STUDENT AGENCY WITH TRANSMEDIA

Amanda Hovious, Ph.D. student
University of North Texas, USA.
amandahovious@my.unt.edu

Valerie Harlow Shinas, Ph.D.
Lesley University, USA.
vshinas@lesley.edu

Ian Harper, Producer Inanimate Alice
CEO, Bradfield Narrative Designs Inc., Canada.
harperjian@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Student agency is defined as a student’s sense of self-control over his or her educational experiences. It is a critical aspect of learning among adolescents. One way to promote student agency in the classroom is through the integration of texts and tools that allow students to become producers and consumers of content. Transmedia—the creation and sharing of narrative across media—is such a tool. This poster presentation illustrates how transmedia can be used to support student agency and engagement, drawing on a foundational case study of middle-grade students who interacted with the project, Inanimate Alice, an interactive novel that follows the adventures of Alice, a globetrotting girl who wants to be a game designer when she grows up. Future directions of the project are demonstrated via a new iteration of Inanimate Alice, a virtual reality (VR) gap story called Perpetual Nomads. The audience may experience Perpetual Nomads with a VR headset and learn about its implications for fostering student agency based on beta testing of the story with middle-grade students. The presenters also discuss an upcoming research initiative that will further test the impact of Perpetual Nomads on digital and technological literacies—an important avenue for fostering student agency.

KEYWORDS
Transmedia, emerging technologies, human agency, student agency, student engagement.

INTRODUCTION
Student agency is defined as a student’s sense of self-control over his or her educational experiences. It is a critical aspect of learning, particularly among adolescents. Bandura’s agentic perspective offers the most useful theory for understanding it (Klemencic, 2017). Bandura (2001) views an agent as an individual that purposely uses his or her actions to make something happen. He states that “agency embodies the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence is exercised” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). Thus, agency represents a set of dispositions that lead to intentional actions and interactions within the environment. In education, student agency is recognized as a major aspect of student engagement, and higher degrees of student agency are associated with greater engagement in learning. The idea of agentic engagement is defined as the student’s “constructive contribution into the flow of instruction” (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, p. 258), and emerging evidence suggests that transmedia may be a useful tool for supporting it.

According to Scolari (2009), transmedia is the creation and telling of narrative across media using multiple modalities. Transmedia leverages the semiotic nature of digital platforms, the innovation of the Internet, and the power of social media to create spaces where readers become co-constructors of dynamic, engaging narratives. Engaging narrative and the ability to co-construct make transmedia a powerful tool for supporting student agency. This poster presentation draws on a foundational case study that illustrates how transmedia narratives were used to support agentic engagement with middle school students. The study highlights the transmedia project, Inanimate Alice, a multi-episode interactive novel that follows the adventures of Alice, a globetrotting girl who wants to be a game designer when she grows up. Future directions for research are introduced through a hands-on demonstration of a new iteration of the project, a virtual reality (VR) story called Perpetual Nomads. Implications of the VR story are discussed, using Perpetual Nomads as an example of how emerging technologies like VR transmedia may be tested in future studies as a tool for supporting digital and technological literacies—an increasingly important avenue for fostering student agency (Warren & Jones, 2017).

THE ROLE OF TRANSMEDIA IN STUDENT AGENCY
Transmedia often incorporates gaming elements, a dynamic feature that lends itself to social constructivist educational approaches that can foster student agency. Agency as the ability to explore has been cited as a reason that students are engaged by game-like transmedia environments (Beavis, Muspratt, & Thompson, 2015). Additionally, putting students into the game designer role gives them a sense of agency over their learning. For example, Warren and Jones (2017) created the role-playing transmedia game Broken Window to teach computer literacy skills. Following transmedia play, students were tasked with creating their own transmedia experiences modeled after the game to demonstrate the skills they learned. Transmedia also fosters student agency through the ability to remix multiple media elements into a new media composition. This too puts students into the designer role, creating meaningful opportunities to express themselves (Ray, 2013). Inanimate Alice
incorporates both gameplay and remixing, and as the following foundational case study illustrates, *Inanimate Alice* offers a pedagogical exemplar for using transmedia to foster student agency.

**FOUNDATIONAL CASE STUDY: ADOLESCENT READERS ENGAGING WITH INANIMATE ALICE**

This foundational case study is drawn from a larger study conducted in the spring of 2012. During the study, the fourteen adolescent students who participated were completing the final term of the 8th-grade year and were all strong readers of traditional texts as measured by performance on standardized assessments. Although all students reported regular access to technology in and out of school, none had previous experience with transmedia narratives.

To understand the potential power of transmedia as a tool to support student agency, data collected during think-alouds and post-reading interviews were examined as well as transcripts of focus groups conducted with ten of the fourteen participants. Data were analyzed in two ways. First, word frequency analysis of all transcripts was conducted to reveal evidence of emerging themes. In addition, open coding and inductive analyses were conducted to identify themes emerging from the data.

Findings revealed that these adolescent students were deeply engaged in the narrative and identified with the main character, Alice. In addition, think-aloud data provided evidence of how students used their personal interpretations of the semiotics and their own prior experiences to become co-creators during meaning making. Students explained how they used their own experiences to immerse themselves in the narrative and create a personalized understanding. Ruby shared:

> Well, when it was telling you about how she was all alone and it was snowing, I thought back to my own experiences because my parents have been out and me and my brother would be home alone during a snowstorm. Or just if it was dark outside and you get really worried, trying to decide what to do, whether or not they’re going to come home.

Similarly, Anna’s think-aloud reveals that she relied on her own interpretations of the images to make meaning:

> Ayisha arrives at our house wearing her niqab, but when she takes it off she’s like a wonderful bird…” And this is, when she says bird, I’m thinking that she looks really pretty. And she’s like, gracious, like a bird, like a bird… like a symbol. Like certain birds are a symbol of peace.

**PERPETUAL NOMADS: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

When considering the foundational case study presented here and the extant and emerging literature, there are important implications of this work. Specifically, it is critical that we look closely at innovative resources and study how these are used by teachers to support student agency and motivation. For example, *Perpetual Nomads* is a recently developed VR story that spans the gap between Episodes Six and Seven of *Inanimate Alice*. Currently in the beta testing phase, initial response from middle-grade students has shown greater engagement and interaction with the story using a VR headset than without one. Considering the experimental nature of VR stories, this may imply that the affordances of VR transmedia can support agentic engagement in ways that more traditional modes of transmedia cannot. To further test this hypothesis, a partnership between the team behind *Perpetual Nomads* and the Fraser Valley Regional Library (FVRL) in Vancouver, BC is in the works. The purpose of this partnership will be to provide the FVRL library community with access to *Perpetual Nomads* and to determine the impact of VR on the development of digital and technological literacies. Findings from the project should provide greater insight into the way VR transmedia can be used to foster student agency in learning environments through the development of digital and technological literacies.

**REFERENCES**


