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Supernatural as a Transmedia Product on and off-screen

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Abstract

Supernatural is a TV series that follows the journey of two brothers who hunt monsters, ghosts and creatures from different urban legends and mythological tales. This paper intends to explore the *Supernatural* universe as a transmedia product. First, it analyzes the expansion of the show in several different media in which the story has been developed. Secondly, it explores the use of fanfiction and its implementation in the narrative of the show, making use of the prosumer's creations. After this, it develops an analysis of the use of metafiction as a central feature throughout the fifteen seasons the show has run. Additionally, this paper goes deeper into the concept of Expansion by analysing the idea of spin-offs developed by the network. Finally, in every section of this paper, it is shown how *Supernatural* integrates the result of such expansion into the narrative of the main story itself. All of the aspects are the ones that contribute to the transformation *Supernatural* into a Transmedia product by expanding its universe through different media and inside the show itself.

Keywords - Transmedia storytelling; Expansion; Media; Fanfiction; Metafiction; Spin-off

Introduction

When the pilot episode of the CW's¹ *Supernatural* first aired back in 2005, the impact it would have on its viewers could not be predicted, as well as the loyalty from the fandom. In short, *Supernatural* follows the life of the Winchester brothers, Dean and Sam, played by Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, respectively, who travel across the United States hunting monsters and creatures, witches, pagan gods or even angels and demons: "They have been possessed; sent to hell, heaven, purgatory; marked by the biblical figure Cain; sent back in time; and much more" (Herrman, 2016). This rich narrative world allowed the creation of different ways of continuing the story which has converted the series into a transmedia product.

¹ Previously called Warner Channel, at the time the show was created.

This paper will explore how the Supernatural Universe has been transformed into a transmedia product to take advantage of the narrative world and how this has been represented in the TV show itself. As Bertetti (2017) says, “fictional worlds are inevitably incomplete “small worlds”, as incompleteness is a distinctive feature of fictional existence” (p.49). The Supernatural TV show can be considered incomplete in itself as it only tells the story from one perspective. However, the beginning of the transmediality of this product provides new points of view and a full expansion of the worldbuilding. Regarding the relationship between the story and the audience, *Supernatural* can be considered to be an open system production because it “allow[s] participation, i.e. the audience can influence the result and change the outcome” (Gambaratto, 2013, p.84). Fans and prosumers can participate by means of interaction and they have been welcomed to co-create or change the narrative.

Supernatural as a Transmedia product

The huge success of *Supernatural* (2005-2020) gave green light to the first expansion of its narrative. In 2010, an animated series premiered as an adaptation of its first two seasons. According to Jenkins (2009), a simple adaptation may not be considered Transmedia Storytelling due as it is not expanding its universe but rather telling the same story through a different medium (crossmedia, Long, 2007). However, this adaptation included original content exploring the Winchesters' childhoods and expanding upon secondary characters. Gambaratto (2015) includes Davidson's approach, which it can be stated that *Supernatural* is mainly a retroactive transmedia project given that it “start[s] to be planned after (...) a successful preexistent project. This is the case when a book [In this case, a T.V. Show] (...) is already created and it is subsequently expanded to become a transmedia experience” (2013, 87).

The first expansions

The first expansion created to explore the universe of *Supernatural* is the set of comic books published in 2007. This series tell the lives of different characters previous to the pilot episode of the show.² Following Jenkins' principles, these are instances of Subjectivity as they explore the narrative through new eyes. The stories are told from a variety of viewpoints, encompassing a range of characters who were familiar to the already established fanbase.

² These comic books are divided into four volumes: *Supernatural: Origins*, *Supernatural: Rising Son*, *Supernatural: Beginning's End* and *Supernatural: Caledonia*

This is also what Jenkins called the principle of Drillability as fans could start to explore in-depth the narrative of this product.

Another instance of expansion was *Ghostfacers*, a web series spin-off featuring the Ghostfacer which consisted of 10 webisodes, starting in 2010. The main characters have appeared on several episodes of the show as amateurs ghosthunters, who have their own web show. After the popularity of the Ghostfacer, a real web show was produced to give the fans a glimpse of their “work”.

Finally, a new spin-off series, *The Winchesters*³, has premiered on the CW channel. This product goes further into the story of Sam and Dean’s parents, how they got together, and how they saved the world. This is the first instance of a live-action expansion which was greenlit by the company in charge⁴. This spin-off contributes to what Jenkins defines as Seriality and Subjectivity; two other core principles of transmedia narrative.

The fanfiction phenomenon inside the show

The popularity of *Supernatural* provoked the creation of different types of fanfiction which have been included into the narrative, mainly as a joke or as a way of addressing the fan’s criticism.

[...] fanfiction balances between the receiver’s reaction to a programme-text and an artistic interpretation that may function as an independent work of art, and therefore it often retains the voice of an author as that of a receiver. (Menise, 2020, p.26)

This idea of containing both voices is relevant because the prosumer have taken into consideration the original plot of the show when creating their fanfics and, at the moment of including these fans' ideas into the show, the voices of the prosumers have been also heard, showing a reciprocal and collaborative work from the fans and the writers.

The first instance of fanfiction can be seen in season 4, when the Winchesters realise that their lives have been recorded in a series of comic books, also called *Supernatural* - as a literal reference to the real comic books. Here, the brothers discover an online fandom, with both Sam and Dean Girls and 'Slash'⁵ fans⁶, making reference to real life events. Later on, the

³ Link to a trailer in the Appendix A for further exploration of the product.

⁴ There was another attempt to expand the universe with a spin-off back in 2018 but it was not picked up by the company. This one was called *Wayward Sisters*.

⁵ Slash fan: Fans who ship the brothers as a couple, which has been popularly called “Wincest”.

⁶ Youtube extract of the episode in the Appendix B for reference.

main characters find the writer of those books, Chuck, who explains he has visions of the brothers that he turns into stories. Chuck is an actual representation of Eric Kripke, the creator of the show, and a central piece in the Supernatural narrative.

These instances of metafiction allowed the exploration of new narratives to incorporate new ideas from the fans. The 200th episode, called "Fan Fiction", is claimed to be pure metafiction because it is about a musical based on the comic books. This episode also contains references to the fandom pairings Wincest, Sastiel (Samstiel) and Destiel⁷ showing how fans are still creating these noncanonical stories after a decade. In Jenkins (2006) words, "fans spend a great deal of time debating the alternative interpretations of the characters which appear in their stories"⁸. These are used as a comic relief in the plot but at the same time, the episode deals with topics that fans have been questioning from years, as it is the case of Sam and Dean's younger brother, Adam⁹.

The *French Mistake* reaction

Supernatural's "The French Mistake" (Season 6, Episode 15) has been cited as one of the best episodes of the series. In short, this episode shows how the Winchester brothers are sent into an alternate reality. In this new world, they find they are now "Jensen Ackles" and "something called a Jared Padalecki." Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, just as they are in real life, are the stars of a show called Supernatural. Sam and Dean hilariously have to navigate this world in order to go back home. This episode has given the fans the opportunity to be immersed in the production of *Supernatural* as they have been able to see the writers and producers of the show dealing with the actual filming itself.

The contributions of conventions

The Supernatural Conventions are a point of convergence between fans and the cast and producers of the show. These give open space to what Jenkins calls the principle of performance.

⁷ Sastiel and Destiel are shipping names matching Sam or Dean with Castiel, a recurrent character who first appeared in season 4 and has become a fan favourite.

⁸ Information retrieved from http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/09/fan_fiction_as_critical_commen.html

⁹ Since season 5, Adam has been trapped in Hell but never mentioned again in the show until this episode. Adam's fate has been a recurrent topic in the Supernatural fandom for years and, after this short mention, it ignited the fires even more.

“Most of *Supernatural*’s success lies [...] in the strong and extremely active and dedicated community of fans that religiously watch the show, participate in conventions, buy merchandise, follow the actors, and, eventually, take over the Internet with their comments, fan pages, fan fiction, etc” (Gonçalves, 2015, p.16).

Supernatural Conventions have been addressed in the show, for example, in season 5, the main characters arrive at a *Supernatural* convention organized by fans of the comic books. Here, they encounter hundreds of people dressed as Sam and Dean. This episode made reference to how the fanbase has been exploring and getting involved in the universe by attending these conventions. In the episode, there are instances of Jenkin’s concepts of Performance, as people are dressed as different characters, Drillability, as fans are capable of exploring and analysing the narrative with other fans and the people in charge of the show, and Extractability with all the products fans can take home.

Conclusion

After analysing all the previous factors which have been mentioned before, it can be said that *Supernatural* indeed is a Transmedia product as it has expanded its universe through different media, such as comic books, an animated series, fan-fiction and the new spin-off series. It was also demonstrated that all the seven core concepts of transmedia storytelling presented by Jenkins can be found in the analysis of the product giving more evidence of the transmediality of the universe. Finally, several instances of the use of transmedia ideas can be traced down inside the TV show itself, as they have been used in order to expand the narrative and to demonstrate that fans have been a source of inspiration for the narrative itself. This demonstrates how *Supernatural* as a Transmedia product is an open system which still has several opportunities to keep expanding in the future projects already in the work.

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Appendix

A- *The Winchesters* Trailer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCL_vwl4XUw

B- Supernatural 4.18 Sam n Dean Discover Slash Fans:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luX5bFbcByk>