



The City as Escape Room: Place, Participation, Meaning, and Affect

Roy Hanney

Solent University (Southampton, United Kingdom)

E-mail: roy.hanney@solent.ac.uk

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7374-0032

Abstract. Through the lens of ecologies of belonging, *The City as Escape Room* transfers a simple and commonly held understanding of the escape room into a metaphor that reveals a complex layering of place, participation, and affect in meaning-making for transmedia storytellers. It situates the city as a play space where community participation, meaning-making, and co-creation are interwoven as meaningful story experiences. By mirroring the practice of urban foraging, the discussion explores transmedia storytelling as a form of sympoiesis that brings into being a shared memory, a becoming-with the city for the community that resides within. Avoiding the common placemaking tropes associated with public sector marketing and economic (re)generation, city-wide transmedia storytelling is instead considered a form of speculative fabulation that can defamiliarize the familiar and generate affective story experiences. The offering of a case study that contrasts commercial and community-driven transmedia experiences further illuminates how immersive experience design can take hold of a city as a play space and render it as a meaningful story experience.

Keywords: affect, experiential, storytelling, transmedia, narrative.

1. Introduction

In 2019, I successfully applied for Arts Council Funding to undertake a sandbox transmedia storytelling project in Portsmouth, UK. The project adapted a novel by local writer Matt Wingett, who had written and self-published a contemporary magic realist story called *The Snow Witch*, set in Portsmouth. The project, titled *Cursed City Dark Tide*, was, in part, inspired by various experiences as an audience member of immersive theatre productions, such as *Sleep No More*¹

¹ Punchdrunk's UK production of *Sleep No More* was directed by Felix Barrett, the founder of Punchdrunk, alongside Maxine Doyle, the company's choreographer and associate director.

and *The Drowned Man*² by Punch Drunk, among others. I was also intrigued by Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and the idea that you could take theatre out of traditional spaces and situate it in the real world.

Particular inspiration came from *Conspiracy for Good*, sponsored by Nokia and delivered in London, UK, and online in 2010 (Andersen 2010). Part alternate reality game (ARG) and part social movement, *Conspiracy for Good* blurred fact and fiction, creating an immersive story world in which the audience worked together to bring down an evil corporation. Players used mobile apps to solve puzzles, hack CCTV cameras and participated in “live actions,” all aimed at building a real library in Zambia. They encountered non-player-characters (NPCs), hunted down the corporation’s headquarters and even canvassed a real medical conference. Even at the time, reviews were not quite sure what to call it. *Wired* described it “as an amalgamation of an alternate reality game, a street theatre show, and a social movement” (Andersen 2010).

A decade later, we might frame *Conspiracy for Good* as a transmedia experience, while the people who create these kinds of projects now call themselves *experience designers*. Many come from a psychology background rather than media, theatre, or related subject disciplines. For example, Lara Hoefs, transmedia producer of *The Twilight Saga*, holds a master’s degree in media psychology and social change. This speaks to the sense that experience design as an emerging practice draws together a range of subject disciplines. At its heart is the notion that experiential storytelling requires an altogether different skillset from that of film or theatre directing. Unlike traditional storytelling forms that guide audiences through a predetermined sequence of scenes or shots, experiential storytelling requires creators to design environments that allow participants to explore and construct their own narrative pathways. For instance, in Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, the audience roams freely through intricately designed spaces, uncovering parts of the story at their own pace, a concept that necessitates careful attention to spatial design, psychology, and interactivity rather than linear narrative control.

But how do you explain what transmedia storytelling is to undergraduate students and arts practitioners alike? How do you conceptualize a transmedia story going beyond the traditions, paradigms, and tropes of linear narrative to

This immersive adaptation of *Macbeth* premiered in London in 2003, staged at the Beaufoy Building in Kennington.

2 *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* was also directed by Barrett and Doyle. This production ran from July 2013 to July 2014 in a disused postal sorting office in Paddington, London, in collaboration with the National Theatre. It reimaged *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner within a 1960s Hollywood setting.

tell fundamentally experiential stories? It is, I would argue, a complex, abstract idea. I would label it a threshold concept. Jenkins tells us that “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” (2007).

The idea is that there is no single story delivery mechanism; the audience gathers story fragments across multiple media platforms, with the experience unfolding both in the real world and virtually at the same time, making it quite complex to coordinate. Add to this heady brew the notion that the audience is now the author of their own experience, and you have a highly abstract concept. When I say that the audience is now the “author” of their own experience, I mean that, instead of passively consuming a story, each audience member actively shapes their own narrative journey. Through the choices they make within the story environment – deciding which characters to follow, what locations to explore, or which digital platforms to engage – they construct a unique version of the story, personalized to their interactions. This kind of storytelling requires a subtle, complex, and nuanced approach to designing experiences that motivate participants to take a step into the story world and continue playing. Transmedia storytelling is more than the sum of its parts – you can teach the elements and the building blocks, and you can deploy theory and analysis, but, taken all together, this still doesn’t really describe what it is to *do* transmedia. There is a complexity to the idea that when compounded with an ever-evolving technological, cultural, and creative landscape, as a concept, “transmedia” is hard to pin down.

Over time, I found that a simple, clear, and effective way to try and get this complex idea across is to say it’s the *City as Escape Room*. I don’t think it really does the idea of transmedia justice, but it’s a starting point for a conversation when communicating with students, practitioners and others collaborating on projects. This metaphorical framing of the *City as Escape Room* also offers a lens through which this study can address its research questions. It enables an exploratory investigation of narrative theory for transmedia storytelling that might account for how meaning is co-created in experiential storytelling. One that explores how community engagement, collective memory, and the process of becoming-with the city can contribute to this co-creation of experience. By drawing parallels between urban foraging and street art as urban practices, the study asks if transmedia storytelling is a form of *sympoiesis* (Haraway 2016, 33), in which a shared memory and a sense of becoming-with the city emerges for the

community residing within it. By framing the city as an “escape room,” this study suggests that transmedia storytelling allows for an immersive and participatory engagement with urban spaces, where community members actively co-create narrative experiences. Through this lens, the argument is that transmedia storytelling is not merely about storytelling across platforms but about fostering a sympoietic relationship between people and place – a “becoming-with” the city that generates shared memories and deepens the community’s sense of belonging.

2. Ecologies of Belonging in Transmedia Storytelling: Place, Participation, and Affect

If the urban landscape can be thought of as a text, then movement through that space can be seen as a form of reading, in which the urban is encountered differently, and that which before may have been *indifferent* is now imbued with new meaning and purpose. Arguably, this weaving together of fragmentary encounters creates place, crafting a personal story that has affect for the storyteller. Here, the experience can change an “individuals’ dispositional orientation to the world” (Duff 2010, 885). Duff expounds on this idea and argues that individuals are empowered or disempowered towards action through the “affect resonances” that emerge from encounters between “bodies, contexts and events,” and resonances that “evolve and mutate” with repetition or defamiliarization such that place becomes more than geography, physical structures, or objects (2010, 885). Instead, it is a lived experience, a “becoming-with” (Haraway 2016, 12) the city. This “thickening of place” – as Duff (2010, 886) claims, is a response to *affective atmospheres* that instigate an assemblage of “relational interactions.” Becoming-with the city³ is an unfolding of the experiential that comes about through an encounter with an assemblage of meaning-making, relationship-building, situatedness, and connectivity (Burnett and Merchant 2021, 357). It recognizes meaning-making as an assemblage of human and other-than-human encounters. It is a kind of *sympoiesis* that emerges through collectively produced entanglements of relations (Haraway 2016, 33), knotting together people, places, and meaning. You might almost think of it as a kind of collective fabulation, a shared fable-making or communal world-building. The notion of becoming-with

3 “Becoming-with the city” refers to a dynamic relationship where individuals and the city co-evolve, interacting in ways that transform the urban landscape into a lived, affective experience. Rather than a static environment, the city becomes an active participant in meaning-making, fostering shared stories, connections, and memories through collective creation.

the city thus offers a possibility for imagining place-based storytelling that enfolds the real and the imaginary for the audience through a co-created experience.

This idea of the urban as a site of a complex layering of place, participation, and affect resonates with Michel de Certeau's (1988) reading of the city. For de Certeau, a crucial element in understanding the affective dimensions of place is the notion of practice. De Certeau conceives practice as the repertoire of tactics through which individuals make sense of everyday life in the city. Walking, break dancing, skateboarding, socializing, and other practices are examples of how individuals produce place and contribute to the city's lived experience. In the context of transmedia storytelling, engaging in activities such as walking, investigating, seeking, observing, encountering, socializing, collaborating, and producing becomes a form of place-making. Accordingly, de Certeau recognizes the city as an existential locale that involves an encounter with *thick places*, which for him are characterized by the overlapping and layering of affect, habit, and practice. These *thick places* deepen the experience of the city, providing a fertile and dynamic environment constantly unfolding. They are spaces of "becoming-with" negotiated by the individuals who inhabit them.

The *affective atmospheres* within these *thick places* encompass a myriad of social, material, and discursive resources that render place as a lived experience. They offer a potential for action and enable individuals to enact their dispositions or agency. A dialogic relationship exists between individuals and the material environment, where they write upon and are written upon by the city itself. According to Casey (2001, 684), *thick places* result in a deeper affective experience and an enhanced sense of belonging. In contrast, *thin places* lack resonance and are easily forgettable. They are often indifferent, unseen, and familiar, blending into the background. Examples of *thin places* include airport terminals, shopping malls, and fast-food restaurants, although it is essential to note that some individuals may find these places deeply affective. *Thin places* lack the unique qualities that enable inhabitants to engage with the material environment meaningfully, and often lack distinct specificity.

The thickening of place occurs through the emergent intensity that arises from the assemblage of bodies, materiality, and discursive representations. This intensification generates a sense of belonging and connectedness, providing purpose and potential for action and dispositional orientations of the city's inhabitants. This, in turn, leads to personal enrichment. Ultimately, belonging is an effect of dwelling in *thick places*. The affective resonance with place enhances the experience of dwelling in the city, facilitating a becoming-with relationship

between individuals and their environment. Through transmedia storytelling and an encounter with *thick places*, individuals can forge a deeper connection to the city and enrich their lived experience.

According to Hancox (2021, 18), when individuals participate in transmedia experiences that emphasize place, they become situated within a specific political and social context. This situational aspect evokes affective responses, stimulating feelings and emotions while fostering connection and understanding among participants. For Hancox, transmedia has the capacity to shed light on the relationships between people, places, and practices, highlighting their interconnectedness. For Hancox (2021, 15), place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience within transmedia storytelling. Place serves as a gathering point, bringing together multiple elements: the medium's materiality, the meaning created through representation, and the practices chosen by the creators. These elements combine to shape the immersive nature of the transmedia experience, allowing it to "inhabit place" (Hancox 2021, 16) as an existential locale.

3. The City as a Play Space: Participation and Co-Creation

Embracing the concept of "inhabiting place" suggests that high-quality transmedia storytelling should be deeply embedded in the specific environment, stressing the significance of physical and symbolic qualities of place in the story experience, such that meaning-making and place-making become interconnected. The specific locations and contexts within the narrative thereby contribute to constructing meaning. So, the participants' engagement with these places also shapes their understanding and connection to the story, offering a unique possibility for audiences to engage with narratives that enhance their connections to place. By privileging place as a central discourse, transmedia experiences become more immersive and can resonate with participants on emotional, social, and political levels, expanding the potential for critical reflection, ethical considerations, and the exploration of power dynamics within the realm of experiential storytelling.

To explore these ideas further, I want to give two concrete examples of how affect can be used to unpack how narrative might be seen to function in transmedia storytelling. The first, on urban foraging, is used to illustrate how *resonant affect* generates a storying experience. The second explores how street art creates *affective atmospheres*. Together, these mini-excursions serve to frame the case study that then follows. I am using the term affect here to refer to the emotional or

sensory impact that environments, objects, and interactions have on individuals, shaping their responses, perceptions, and connections to place. Affect operates as a pre-cognitive, embodied experience that arises through encounters within a space, resonating with people on a level that influences their sense of belonging and orientation to the world. For a definition rooted in this approach to affect, you might consider Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), which examines how affective encounters shape individual and collective experiences. Ahmed's work provides insight into how affect influences relationships between people, objects, and spaces, aligning well with the themes of embodied and place-based connection in your paper.

3.1. Urban Foraging as an Allegory for Resonant Affect in Transmedia Storytelling

In their study of Urban Foraging, Poe et al. (2014) explored how the ecologies of belonging model provide insight into the practice of identifying and collecting wild foods (such as tree nuts, plant roots, mushrooms, and even flowers) growing freely around your city. They argue that it forges deep affective connections to place. Relationships between people and the more-than-human urban wildlife (plants, animals, insects, etc.) form a sense of belonging that is discursive and fundamentally social. It is a process of becoming-with the city. The study by Poe et al. also identified the different ways in which urban foragers felt they had created a "deeper, more intimate knowledge of the city with layered meanings built up over time" (2014, 10). People felt more connected to an area, and they changed how they thought about place.

This kind of *thickening of place* comes about as the indifference once felt towards urban landscape elements transformed into acute sensibility. As expert and specialist knowledge grows for practitioners, disregarded urban areas become important sites of interest. The defamiliarization of the physical and its objects reveals a complex assemblage of being and becoming, alongside and towards the world (Poe et al 2014, 4). Harvested vegetables and fruits in raw form or after being further transformed (cooked) are exchanged and may even be traded as commodities. A multiplicity of enactments and entanglements occur through which the urban and the social are co-constituted (Poe et al. 2014, 5). Out of an engagement with a set of *affective atmospheres*, the urban food forest emerges a *resonant affect* as a consequence of deeper observation of the urban coupled with the acquisition of expert knowledge.

A similar kind of *affect resonance*⁴ – the emotional or sensory attunement between individuals and their environment that shapes perception and engagement (Duff 2010) – can be found in any transmedia storytelling embedded in the urban environment. Not only does locating stories within a site-specific context encourage participants to feel like they live somewhere special (Manwaring 2014, 308), but aren't the participants of this kind of experience also engaged in such foraging? Instead of looking for plants, berries and other foods, the participants may be looking for clues, connections and locations, puzzling about how to synthesize the different story elements. Another similar requirement to acquire and share specialist knowledge also contributes to defamiliarizing the urban landscape and its objects, alongside the exchanging of artefacts collected through foraging acts. Each encounter with the urban, as the participants work together or alone to find clues and solve puzzles, acts to “orientate [participants] to their environment in different ways” (Poe et al. 2014, 10).

This kind of storying through place can facilitate learning and inspire audiences to revisit and reconnect with their environment and see it through a new perspective (Gersie et al. 2014, 20). Solving puzzles or undertaking other actions as part of a story experience is a form of active engagement that pushes participants to interact with the physical world and its objects differently. It encourages higher levels of active participation in an immersive story experience, serves as a form of listening-response activity that promotes a deeper empathetic connection with the objects of interaction, and teaches participants to empathise with other experiences and points of view (Gersie et al. 2014, 43). However, for a thickening of place to occur, transmedia story task responses must be integrated into the urban social, or the generation of *resonant affect* is unlikely to occur.

3.2. Street Art as an Allegory for Affective Atmospheres in Transmedia Storytelling

Just as affective atmospheres emerge from interactions within a space, creative acts like street art also contribute to the emotional and sensory fabric of the urban environment, generating affect resonance. Street art serves as a powerful example of how artistic expression can shape the city's atmosphere, creating a lived experience that resonates with both artists and the community. Through

4 The term “affect resonance” is most often associated with the work of philosopher Brian Massumi, who explores how affect circulates and resonates between bodies and environments, influencing perception and experience.

these acts, the city becomes more than a backdrop; it transforms into a space alive with meaning and collective memory.

Noted street art scholar Martin Irvine (2012) contends that street art inserts itself into the materiality of the city – that it can be seen as a materialization of an argument about the visibility of, and an engagement with, the city as a neighbourhood, where place becomes an assemblage of surfaces onto which the inhabitants of that neighbourhood can inscribe their presence semiotically. So, the city becomes a canvas and a raw material of the collage, as the artists themselves, as social actors embedded within the cultural milieu of the neighbourhood, project the communities’ interests onto its walls and street furniture. This contest for visibility can be seen as anarchic, juvenile, essentially destructive and, in many cases, would be deemed an act of illegal vandalism. On the other hand, street art can add colour to a neighbourhood, is often highly sought-after and is even considered high art. Whatever one’s belief is, Irvine suggests that, in most cases, street artists are motivated by an intense empathy with the city. They identify with the city – its landscape and the people who live there. They often come to express feelings towards the city with which other occupants identify. Through street art, a city “re-images and re-imagines” itself (Irvine 2012, 237) as the street artist engages in a dialogic critique of self, community, and place.

Prehistoric cave paintings reflect a similar engagement with place as a canvas for the social. Is it such a giant leap then to think of prehistoric cave paintings as generators of a *resonant affect* for the cave’s dwellers? As a form of ritual magic, it expresses a becoming-with the world as early humans engage in mark-making that projects the social onto the physical domain, which they inhabit.⁵ This is a kind of contagious magic that conjoins the urban and the social through *resonant affect*. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer explains that contagious magic: it “proceed[s] upon the notion that things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to the one must similarly affect the other” (1922, 37).

This is evident in the practice of graffiti writing, a form of tagging of the urban that conjoins the mark maker and the environment through the act of marking. A form of territorialization, a co-opting of the urban that puts it to work for the mark maker. A becoming-with, if you like, of the artists and the fabric of the urban environment; this contested space in which many of us dwell. This is the nature

5 Contagious Magic. *Hidden Medway*, December 23, 2007. <https://hiddenmedway.wordpress.com/2007/12/23/contagious-magic/>. Last accessed 30. 10. 2024.

of urban magic – it doesn't set out to cast spells necessarily but to draw into itself the presence of the city to interact with it through the inscription of shamanic totems. Thereby reclaiming the urban from the ever-colonizing corporate façade of privacy, restricted access, push button and chain fence ownership. Graffiti writing, in particular, but street art more generally, can be perceived as examples of city sigils, as a form of contagious magic. We might consider, then, that street artists story the urban by creating *affective atmospheres* that conjure place through the inscription of spells and incantations onto the walls and street furniture of a neighbourhood (Penczak 2001). They might even be considered shamanic place makers who cast spells that thicken places through *affective atmospheres*.

3.3. Storying Place and the Co-Creation of Experience through Transmedia

If street artists' marking of the urban landscape constitutes one side of a coin, on the flip side is urban foraging. Both are acts of storying – the first is an act of creation, while the second might be considered an act of discovery. One writes upon the city while the other is written upon by the city itself. Both, however, are unified in a symposium or act of co-creation, from which meaning emerges, leading to a thickening of place. This mirrors the symbiotic role of artists and catchers (photographers) within street art culture. Street artists utilize public spaces as their canvas, creating visually captivating and thought-provoking artworks that contribute to the aesthetics and cultural fabric of the city. Catchers, or we might also think of them as foragers, on the other hand, play a crucial role in capturing and documenting these ephemeral street art pieces, preserving them as images that can be shared, disseminated, and appreciated beyond the immediate physical space. Legendary street art photographer Martha Cooper talks about how, in the early days of the New York Street Art Movement (circa 1970s–1980s), when the artists left the railway yards in the early morning after spending all night painting subway cars, they would immediately call their photographer contacts and let them know which yard they had been painting in.⁶ Then the photographers would know which stations to go and wait at to catch the previous night's graffiti.

This relationship has been amplified through social media platforms such as Instagram, which has further cemented the symbiosis. Artists' and catchers' hashtags circulate digital images, promoting them to their respective audiences.

6 Q&A with Martha Cooper. Panel discussion at *The Word on the Street: Graffiti, Typography and Art*, British Library, May 17th, 2019.

Described as a “contemporary flaneur” foraging among the urban landscape for the latest piece of street art (MacDowall 2019, 42), the catcher collaborates in the circulation of the street artist’s work, transforming the work from ephemeral, transient sigils to a permanent, lasting record that can be endlessly recirculated as a form of creative currency. This collaboration between street artists and photographers is more than symbiotic, it is arguably sympoietic (Haraway 2016) in that the artists’ creations gain visibility and recognition through the catchers’ documentation, while the catchers find subjects of artistic and journalistic interest in the vibrant urban art scene. Together, they create the culture of street art, and they *thicken place* and co-create meaning. Here, then, is a practical example of how transmedia might gather and thicken place through a sympoietic relationship between those generating *affective atmospheres* and those experiencing them through *resonant affect*.

4. Transmedia Storytelling as Sympoiesis and Becoming-with the City

Before I explore the case study, I want to take a further mini-excursion to better illustrate the difference between a transmedia story experience that has a *resonant affect* and one that, in my experience, doesn’t. The aim here is not to denigrate the commercial example given below, but to offer a comparison that might better frame the intention and the accomplishments presented in the *Cursed City Dark Tide* case study.

4.1. CluedUpp – An Enterprise Model of Transmedia

*CluedUpp Games*⁷ is a renowned games studio specializing in creating unparalleled outdoor experiences across more than 80 countries globally. Their events transform city streets into captivating adventures that seamlessly blend mystery-solving and escape-room elements, making them ideal for groups of friends or families seeking thrilling challenges. Participants engage in immersive activities, testing their puzzle-solving skills while competing against numerous other teams in a city-wide experience like no other.

In a CluedUpp game, teams have the opportunity to partake in an exciting outdoor adventure along with hundreds of other participants. Armed with

7 Outdoor Experiences and Team Building Activities. *CluedUpp Games*, 2023. <https://www.cluedupp.com/>. Last accessed 30. 10. 2024.

the highly acclaimed smartphone app developed by the studio, players get to explore their city streets, encountering virtual challenges and interacting with essential characters in the storyline. As they solve puzzles and discover clues, a captivating narrative unfolds, leading them closer to an exhilarating finale. Flexibility is a key feature of the CluedUpp experience, allowing participants to pause the game whenever they wish to have a relaxed lunch, enjoy a refreshing drink, or take a break when needed. The events offer numerous prizes, including recognition for the fastest team to complete challenges, the team with the best-dressed appearance, the most creative team name, and other exciting rewards. With multiple events taking place throughout the year, *CluedUpp Games* ensures a wide array of themes to cater to different preferences, guaranteeing that there is an event suitable for everyone's interests and enjoyment. However, while this all sounds very exciting, my own experience of participating in a CluedUpp game was a little disappointing. The game I joined was billed as a "Sherlock Holmes adventure," and the invitation asked people to dress up in deer stalkers and other Victorian garb, which people did. They also thematically styled the puzzles and the adventures as a detective adventure along the same lines. Now, the city where I did this game was Portsmouth, a city with a great attachment to Sherlock Holmes's author, Arthur Conan-Doyle, and in which many of the early stories were written. You wouldn't have known that playing the game, as it is an experience entirely disconnected from the city as a place, its architecture, or its history.

This is what might be termed an *enterprise model* of transmedia storytelling. Though clearly popular and those taking part find it very enjoyable, what *CluedUpp Games* offer is a generic template for an adventure game – a template designed to be overlaid upon any city and which can be literally dropped onto a map of any locale on the planet. This is evident from a quick look at their website, where apparently the same game can be played in 80 different cities across the globe. While this is a great example of enterprise, it lacks the kind of *thickening of place* or *becoming-with* the city that might be possible if the experience were to truly inhabit the city.

4.2. Cursed City Dark Tide – Becoming with the City

In contrast, *Cursed City Dark Tide* set out to embed itself within the urban landscape in such a way that the real city and the city of the story world would become indistinguishable. The ACE-funded transmedia story, set in Portsmouth in 2019, originated from a book by a local author. The novels' contemporaneous

magic realist narrative was set in a slightly earlier version of Portsmouth, and the creative team adapted three of the characters from the novel for the transmedia story: the protagonist (Donnitza Kravitch), a trickster figure (Reynold Lissitch) from the original story, and a deceased female character (Jane Downey) from the back story of the novel, who appeared in the transmedia story as a ghost trapped between worlds.

As a sandbox experiment, the initiative aimed to explore transmediality as a creative practice. It was developed as a community arts project that began with a series of public creative writing workshops and eventually co-opted a small group of local writers and artists who conceptualized and implemented the entire project. The story for the new experience design drew inspiration from the narrative structure of *Noh Theatre*, revolving around a simple premise: a wise traveller arrives in a new location where they encounter a spirit, leading to the spirit's ultimate liberation. This structure resonated deeply with the backstory of *The Snow Witch* novel, where a deceased female character – never directly encountered in the narrative – serves as a key plot driver. After attending a *Noh Theatre* festival at Kings Place, I recognized a striking parallel between the ghostly figures in *Noh* and the novel's deceased girl, particularly in the Japanese concept of the *onryō*, a vengeful female spirit who returns to seek retribution or closure for wrongs suffered or unresolved issues from her life. This provided the ideal framework for the transmedia story, allowing us to reimagine Reynold Lissitch, the trickster from the novel, as a paste-up street artist embodying a shapeshifting fox spirit, and acting as the “chorus” in a narrative of liberation and closure.

The role of Lissitch in the story was very much inspired by the work of local paste-up artists in the city at the time. [Fig. 1.] Paste-up street art, also known as wheat-paste or poster art, involves the creation of art pieces using paper or printed materials affixed to public surfaces such as walls, buildings or street furniture using a paste or adhesive. These artworks often feature various imagery, including illustrations, photographs, collages, or texts, and serve as an artistic expression in public spaces, making thought-provoking statements. The genesis for this creative urge occurred when I found myself trying to problem-solve a story idea for the project. For a long time, I had wanted to do something with an idea about people in the 1970s–1980s leaving streams of cassette tape wrapped around lampposts and other street furniture with magic incantations recorded on them. However, I needed to set the story in a contemporary time frame and, obviously, cassette tape wouldn't work. The *eureka* moment came when I made the leap to paste-ups as a potential vehicle for urban magic. The conceit was that

Lissitch, as a shape-shifting fox spirit, having assumed the role of a paste-up artist, had been pasting up coded occult messages around the city.

In early 2019, I created an Instagram account for the character (what self-regarding street artists don't have an Insta account?) and started to populate it with content. At this stage, I was playing the role of catcher; however, in the end, I also became the creator of all the street art of the *Cursed City Dark Tide* project.⁸ Consequently, it was me who you would have seen around the city late at night with a bucket of paste slapping up A4 prints. I even wore a rubber fox mask to create "found" videos and photos to share on Instagram, aiming to create an air of mystery about this strange character roaming the city at night. [Fig. 2.] Each of the paste-ups included coded puzzles that could be decoded by the story participants. And using #lissitch meant that those following the story could track the paste-ups without seeing them with their own eyes. The puzzles once decoded revealed further elements of the story. For instance, the "lost tarot cards" [Fig. 3] image alerted the participants of a particular story thread to a Trip Advisor profile [Fig. 4] belonging to Lissitch. Here, the participants found reviews for several local cafés. The participants could buy a coffee and then be given one of the missing tarot cards and an invitation to a tarot reading evening at a local pub. A partially printed design on the back of each tarot card required participants to collect a number of cards together to match the pattern [Fig. 5]. At the gathering in a local pub, they took part in a card swap with other participants while interacting with one of the actors from the transmedia story who helped with matching the cards and decoding the next puzzle.

The street art element of the story experience was also embedded into Southsea model village, located on the seafront in Portsmouth. The novel's denouement was set in the model village, plus local street artists had already been doing mini street art on the walls of the model township. I commissioned a local artist and placed a model of the story's protagonist in the model village, along with a model of Lissitch complete with paste brush and bucket. [Fig. 6.] Then, on the wall in the model village square, I pasted one of the image designs I had previously placed full-size in the city. In this way, the story sought to make links between elements of the novel, the transmedia story experience, and the urban landscape in which the *Cursed City Dark Tide* was situated, further developing the *affective atmospheres* of the experience design with the intention of promoting a deeper *resonate affect* for those taking part in the story experience.

8 For more information about the *Cursed City Dark Tide* (2019) transmedia story, see: <https://thesnowwitch.com/cursed-city-dark-tide/>. Last accessed 30. 10. 2024.

Though many of the story participants actively sought out the paste-ups, the images were also being photographed and circulated on Instagram by people who initially were unaware of the transmedia story. While other participants tracked the paste-up campaign purely via Instagram by following #lissitch, in one instance, while out pasting up, a couple approached me asking if I was Lissitch. They explained that they had been taking evening walks, hoping to see him in action. At that moment, I wasn't wearing the fox mask, and they admitted to being a little disappointed. However, this shows that an audience was actively out *foraging* for the paste-ups and that the "found footage" video and photographs of a fox pasting up street art in the city had acquired an audience.

During the project, I realized that part of the enjoyment was being out in the city, liberating disused walls and spaces to decorate them with street art. I felt as though I was also discovering the city. I also noted that whenever other people came out with me on my evening past-up walks, they all subsequently talked about seeing the city differently. They started to notice the street art on the walls around them in a way they hadn't before. This chimes with the strapline I used for Lissitch's Instagram posts, "Open your eyes and see the magic." And I think, if you do open your eyes, you will be surprised at quite how much creativity there is on the walls around you.

4.3. Making the City Together: Sympoiesis and Becoming-with the City

In the case study above, we can see how the transmedia story used street art, in this case, paste-ups, to embed story elements into the existing *affective atmospheres* of the urban landscape, such as the coded occult messages placed around the city by the character Reynold Lissitch. These paste-ups encouraged participants to search for clues embedded in the urban environment, blending the story with the city's physical spaces. In this way, the story elaborated its own narrative trajectory within a cultural milieu, pulling on the existing collaborative relationship between artists and catchers. The introduction of specific pieces of artwork into the urban landscape generated a *resonant affect* for the audience, who were transformed from passive spectators to active co-creators through the circulation and recirculation of images, commentary, and puzzle-solving as they interacted with story elements. The table below illustrates the relationships between the two sides of the same act of creation, and how the authors and the audience co-create the experience in sympoiesis.

Affective Atmosphere	Affective Resonances
street artists	catchers
mark makers	photographers
the city as a canvas	the city as a canvas
shamans	foragers
authors	audience
co-creators	co-creators

This table illustrates the sympoietic entanglement between those who create affective atmospheres – such as street artists, mark makers, and authors – and those who experience and respond to these atmospheres, like catchers, photographers, and the audience. Through this dynamic, both creators and participants engage in a shared act of storytelling, where the boundaries between creator and audience dissolve, positioning them all as co-creators of the narrative. This mutual involvement emphasizes how affective atmospheres and resonances are collectively produced, embodying a sympoietic relationship in which meaning and experience emerge together. Donna Haraway conceptualizes this act of sympoiesis (2016, 33) as an entanglement of systems without spatial or temporally defined boundaries. I would argue that the term provides a good starting point for thinking through how meaning in transmedia storytelling is co-created through collaborative and iterative processes of making and becoming together. Sympoiesis acknowledges that narratives are not singular or static, but they emerge and evolve through the interactions of various elements and participants. Additionally, Haraway’s concept recognizes that place-making, participation, and affect are the beating heart of any meaningful transmedia experience.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, if viewed through the lens of ecologies of belonging, the concept of *The City as Escape Room* reveals how transmedia storytelling can be read as a multilayering of place, participation, meaning, and affect. By reimagining the escape room as a metaphor for the city, this article has demonstrated that the city can be viewed as a dynamic play space where community participation, meaning-making, and co-creation can intertwine to create profound story experiences. Experiential storytelling is explored as a form of sympoiesis, drawing inspiration from urban foraging and fostering shared memories and a sense of becoming-with the city for its residents.

Adopting an ecologies of belonging framework for hypothesizing transmedia narrative theory has significant implications for experience designers. The use of the terms *affective atmospheres* and *resonant affect* provides a basis for thinking about how narratives are co-created in non-linear, immersive, and interactive experiences, opening up the possibility of developing a language for talking about experience design and a body of theoretical work on which to draw – one that emphasizes the importance of community engagement, co-creation, and the transformative power of narrative in urban contexts.

Future research could delve into the specific mechanisms and strategies employed in city-wide transmedia storytelling. This could involve examining different storytelling techniques, engagement strategies, and experience designs that enhance the transformative potential of narrative within urban contexts. Research may focus on the role of community participation and co-creation in transmedia storytelling within the city. Exploring how communities engage with and contribute to developing narrative experiences and how their agency shapes the story world can provide insights into the dynamics of collective storytelling and the impact on community identities and a sense of belonging.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Andersen, Michael. 2010. Conspiracy for Good: A Recap of an ARG by the Creator of Heroes. *Wired* August 19. <https://www.wired.com/2010/08/conspiracy-for-good-a-recap-of-an-arg-by-the-creator-of-heroes/>. Last accessed 30. 10. 2024.
- Burnett, Cathy and Guy Merchant. 2021. Returning to Text: Affect, Meaning Making, and Literacies. *Reading Research Quarterly* vol. 56, no. 2: 355–367.
- Casey, Edward S. 2001. Between Geography and Philosophy: What Does It Mean to Be in the Place-World? *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* vol. 91, no. 4: 683–693.
- Certeau, Michel de. 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. California: University of California Press.
- Duff, Cameron. 2010. On the Role of Affect and Practice in the Production of Place. *Environment and Planning, D, Society & Space* vol. 28, no. 5: 881–895.
- Frazer, James George, Sir. 1922. *The Golden Bough; a Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: The Macmillan Company. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015004765577>. Last accessed 30. 10. 2024.

- Gersie, Alida, Anthony Nanson, and Edward Schieffelin. 2014. Introduction. In *Storytelling for a Greener World: Environment, Community and Story-Based Learning*, eds. Edward Schieffelin, Anthony Nanson, and Alida Gersie, 15–50. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Hawthorn Press.
- Hancox, Donna. 2021. *The Revolution of Transmedia Storytelling through Place: Pervasive, Ambient and Situated*. Routledge Advances in Transmedia Studies. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Irvine, Martin. 2012. The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture. In *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, eds. Berry Sandywell and Ian Heywood, 234–278. London, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2007. Transmedia Storytelling. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html. Last accessed 30. 10. 2024.
- MacDowall, Lachlan. 2019. *Instafame: Graffiti and Street Art in the Instagram Era*. London: Intellect Books.
- Manwaring, Kevan. 2014. Stepping through the Gate. In *Storytelling for a Greener World: Environment, Community and Story-Based Learning*, eds. Alida Gersie, Anthony Nanson, and Edward Schieffelin, 304–315. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Hawthorn Press.
- Penczak, Christopher. 2001. *City Magick*. New York: Weiser Books.
- Poe, Melissa R., Joyce LeCompte, Rebecca McLain, and Patrick Hurley. 2014. Urban Foraging and the Relational Ecologies of Belonging. *Social & Cultural Geography* vol. 15, no. 8: 901–919.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Examples of paste up art.

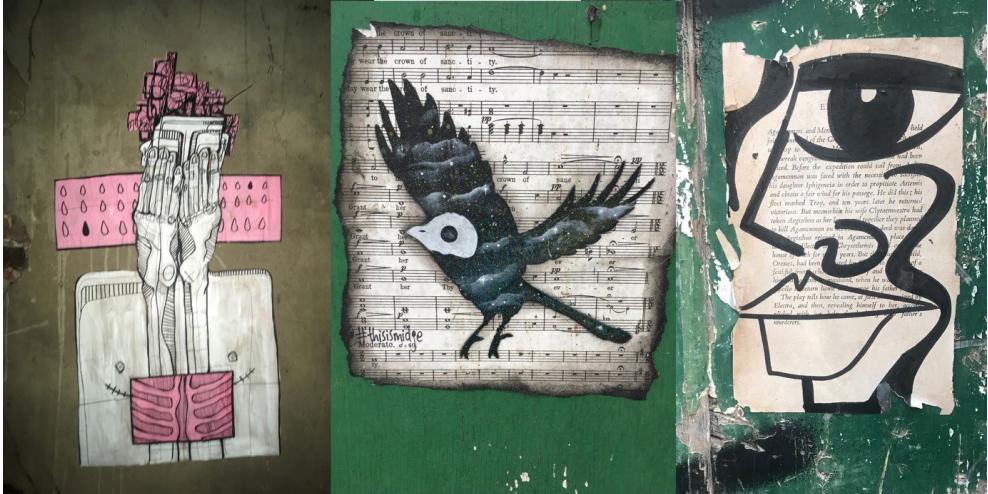


Figure 2. Lissitch found social image pasting up around Portsmouth.

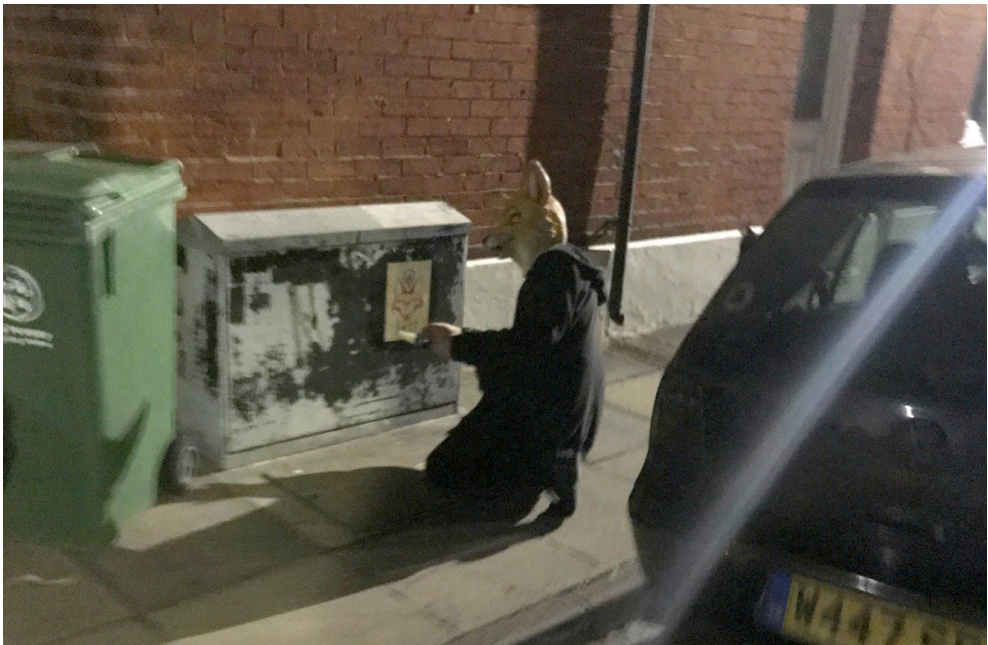


Figure 3. Lissitch paste-up examples.



Figure 4. Lissitch Trip Advisor Reviews.

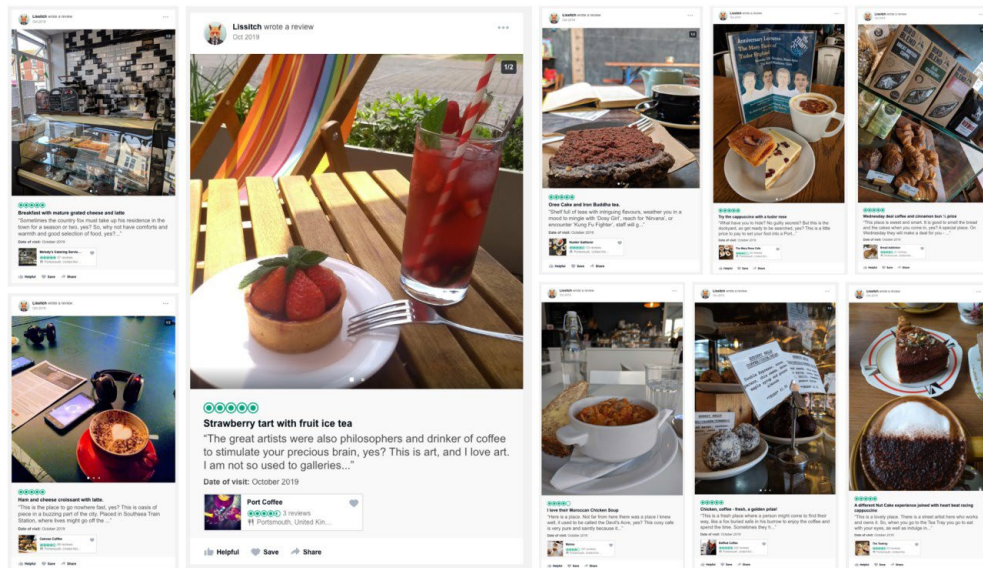


Figure 5. Night of Wands Card Swap Event.



Figure 6. Lissitch in Southsea Model Village with paste brush and bucket.

