Unravelling Negative Capability for Potential Transmediation in The Grave Bandits (2012)

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Abstract

In the era of media convergence, the emphasis of aesthetics alongside economics has affected the manner of production in entertainment businesses. Because of this, new and improved forms of entertainment have emerged, one of them being the practice of transmedia. Transmedia is the technique of distributing media content across multiple platforms, whether narrative or otherwise. As transmedia is a growing media practice and scholarship in Western countries, this paper endeavors to introduce the concept and the field in the Philippines by exploring *The Grave Bandits*, advertised as the first Filipino transmedia film. Since *The Grave Bandits* as a transmedia project is still a work in progress, this study focuses on negative capability, the capacity of a narrative element to incite curiosity among the audience by leaving the element wrapped in mystery, which can be explored in another transmedia expansion. By using Roland Barthes' hermeneutic code and expanding it to accommodate what Geoffrey Long calls the "transmedial context", this research unravels the negative capability of *The Grave Bandits* for potential transmediation. Through an exploration of the film's roster of characters, *The Grave Bandits* offers multiple entry points for transmediation.

Keywords

negative capability, semiotic navigation, storytelling, transmedia, transmedial context
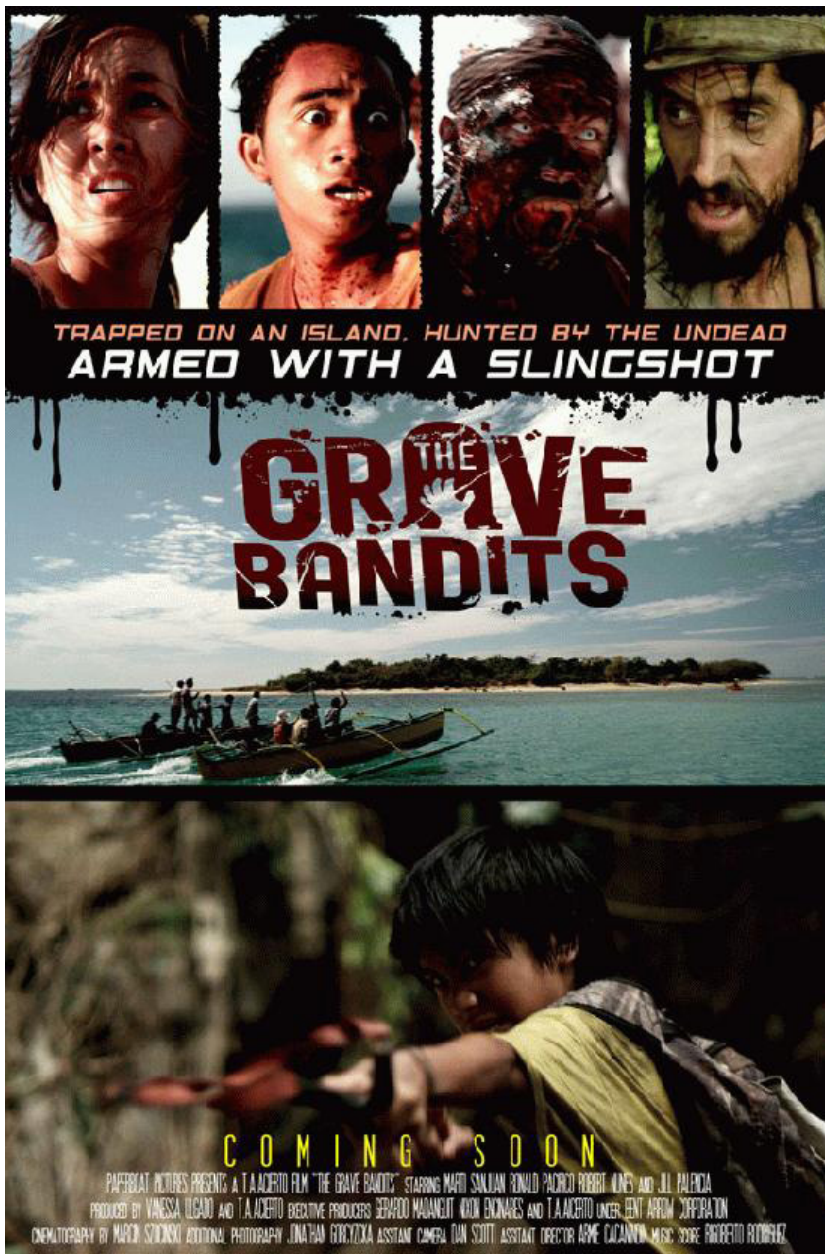
Movie Poster of Tyrone Acierto's *The Grave Bandits* (2012)

The rise of convergence culture paved the way for innovative methods in entertaining audiences. Because of new media and their accompanying technological characteristics, traditional practices in the media industry have been challenged. As media scholar Henry Jenkins explains, convergence culture is the site "where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (2). In the entertainment industry especially, the increasing trend of the audience's immersion and investment in a series has led to the emphasis on aesthetic alongside economic considerations (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling"). For a consumer, a franchise will not suffice if redundancy permeates its media contents. To remedy the problem of repetition, media conglomerates have resolved to what Jenkins calls *transmedia storytelling*.

Transmedia storytelling is the unfolding of a story "across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 97-98). Originally coined by Marsha Kinder (38), a transmedia story may start with a film, continue with a novel, and then television and comics, as well as expand with games. *The Matrix*, *Doctor Who*, and *Lost* are considered as transmedia stories (Jenkins 97; Johnson 1; Perryman 22) because apart from the series' flagship medium, i.e. film for the first example and television for the second and third, they employ comics, cartoons, websites, mobisodes (mobile episodes), and games to make the overarching stories richer.

Multiplatform distribution enables stories to extend their marketability by creating sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and ancillary products. It is a popular technique among films: *Star Wars* episodes I, II, and III, for example—released on 1999, 2002, and 2005 respectively—are prequels to the 1977 film *Star Wars*; while *Star Wars: Clone Wars* is a television series from the same title. This multiplatform distribution dates back to the 1920s, with characters such as Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse (Dena 26). At the time, characters were more viable for a media crossover, as the practice has been observed since 1751, when English poet Christopher Smart used the character Mrs. Mary Midnight, originally from a magazine, in a stage production (Beddows

4). Labeling the practice, however, did not occur until the late 1970s. The term "blockbuster franchise" has been attributed to Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (Dena 26). Adapted from Peter Benchley's novel, *Jaws* enjoyed massive success spawning film sequels, theme parks, musicals, video games, and slot machines.

Jaws may have defined the idea of a blockbuster franchise, but it was George Lucas's *Star Wars* that exemplified the transmedia prototype (Dena 26; Jenkins 108; Long 29). Drawing from the canonical film series, *Star Wars* explores its world through the media franchise called the *Expanded Universe*. It includes books, television series, video games, and comics. These extensions stay true to the films and at the same time builds upon the ideas and aspects of the original story that have not been dealt with in greater depth.

What can be considered as "true" transmedia story, however, did not appear until 1999, when *The Blair Witch Project* (Beddows 5; Jenkins 103) and *The Matrix* (Jenkins 97) came out. Prior to *The Blair Witch Project*, the creators of the film had set up a website devoted to the fictional Burkittsville witch, aired a pseudo-documentary on Sci Fi Channel, and published comic books revolving around the mysterious killings and disappearances of people in the aforementioned town. *The Matrix*, meanwhile, produced animated series, comic books, and games that revolved around the film trilogy, creating a more complex narrative when consumed in its entirety (Jenkins 100). Following Jenkins' example, Geoffrey Long (70) considers Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*—films that were released in 1982 and 1986, respectively—as transmedia stories due to the companion books that came with them.

While transmedia storytelling may be considered a franchise, several media scholars differentiate franchise from transmedia. To them, an entertainment franchise emphasizes profit only, whereas a transmedia story requires a balance between aesthetics and economics (Dena 30; Jenkins 106; Long 30). Each transmedium contributes unique elements to the whole in order to provide the audience a fulfilling experience (Jenkins 104).

Being multi-platform and encompassing different audience demographics, transmedia storytelling does not stop with its entertainment func-

tion; its nature extends to other functions as well. For instance, the employ-ment of transmedia practice can resuscitate a dying program (Perryman 22). It can also establish a fictional brand in the real world instead of relying on advertisers and brand sponsors (Johnson 5). Due to transmedia's vast potential, other fields such as journalism (Alzamora and Tárcia 23; Moloney 11; Pase, Nunes, and Da Fontoura 64), education (Gutierrez 32; Lachman, Clare, and Lieberman 1355; Lamb 16; Lettieri and Faro 23), and branding and advertising (Edwards 2; Ford 111; Johnson 16; Merkin 54; Stork 14) have adopted the practice.

This study seeks to analyze how *The Grave Bandits* lent itself for trans-mediation, through a hermeneutic reading of the film. Using the principle of negative capability (Long 53) makes the analysis of the film conducive for unveiling narrative elements that can give way to transmedia expansion. Given how young transmedia scholarship is still so far, studies that utilize the semiotic cues Long presented still lack the substantial quantity to claim with confidence the efficacy of such modes (Beddows 46); hence, part of this research addresses some of the aforementioned research gaps by using Long's notion of negative capability. In addition, this study explores how the Barthesian hermeneutic code can be appropriated in unraveling negative capability in a narrative.

Transmedia as Storytelling

In order to explain the concept of transmedia storytelling, Jenkins (103) appropriates the ideas of Umberto Eco in his analysis of what made the movie *Casablanca* a cult hit. According to Eco, what makes *Casablanca* a cult movie are its "completely furnished world" (198) and its state of being a "textual syllabus" (199)—that is, it must be "encyclopedic, containing a rich array of information that can be drilled, practiced, and mastered by devoted consumers" (Jenkins 99). These two traits can be applied in transmedia storytelling in general, as illustrated by Jenkins' detailing of the first film of *The Matrix*:

The film's endless borrowings also spark audience response. Layers upon layers of references catalyze and sustain our epistemophilia; these gaps and excesses provide openings for the many different knowledge communities that spring up around these cult movies to display their expertise, dig deep into their libraries, and bring their minds to bear on a text that promises a bottomless pit of secrets (100-101).

He then proceeds to enumerate the various references scattered throughout the film like hidden tokens that, while not immediately important to the plot, invite the audience to play a game of sorts, enriching their viewing pleasure even further.

At such point, Jenkins avers that transmedia storytelling does not yet have a "very good aesthetic criteria for evaluating works that play themselves out across multiple media" (99). Granted, the entertainment franchise has been practicing multiplatform distribution, but several scholars maintain that the main goal of franchise is profit (Dena 30; Jenkins "Transmedia Storytelling"; Long 30). As a result, subsequent studies have developed initial aesthetic qualities for transmedia storytelling. In his thesis, Long proclaims that the primary aesthetic of transmedia is that "each component of a transmedia story is designed as canonical from the outset" (40). Canon dictates what is legitimate in a story, and with large projects such as media franchises, consistency is key: a well-handled, well-thought-out canon aids the fans with what can be analyzed and referenced in their consumption of the story.

Aside from canonicity, storyworlds come up high in the list of significant transmedia qualities. In transmedia storytelling, the greater whole is the world, and everything that constitutes this world is a transmedium story that, while self-contained, echoes certain meanings that can be found throughout the rest of the extensions.

Long asserts that the evolution of technology has allowed for a remarkable change in storytelling (43). In ancient times, plot was the central component of the story; come cinematic era, the character becomes the central focus (Long 32) as evidenced by the character franchises of *Hellboy* and *Indiana Jones*. Another shift of emphasis has occurred today in the era of

media convergence where neither plot nor character suffices for an engaging narrative. It is the world that attracts the audience into coming for more (Aarseth 203; Dena 39; Jenkins 116; Leogrande 88; Long 45; Perryman 24). This is seen by the vast number of titles that are attributed to large franchises such as *Star Wars*, *Final Fantasy*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* series, to name a few.

Because of this trend in entertainment franchises, Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca developed the model of "transmedial worlds" (409). This model sketches out the qualities of a narrative world or universe that make it eligible for transference across media. They define transmedial worlds as "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms" (409). The model draws from the idea of "worldness"—that is, the distinguishing features of the universe shared by the original text and its subsequent texts.

To determine the portability of a narrative world across multiple media, Klastrup and Tosca outline three core elements: mythos, topos, and ethos (412). Mythos refers to the history and culture of the world, the "backstory of all backstories" (412); it is the basis of any successful interpretation of events in the world. Topos pertains to the setting of the world; it includes topography, geography, and the "physics and navigation in the world" (412). Finally, ethos refers to the "explicit and implicit ethics of the world and (moral) codex of behavior which characters in the world are supposed to follow" (412); it is the encompassing philosophy existing in the world. While these three elements constitute the significant aspects of transmedial worlds, Klastrup and Tosca stress that the success of the world is still dependent on how designers make use of the materials supplied.

World-building provides the opportunity for unlimited exploration and space for fans to settle in. A single work or medium cannot contain the entirety of a storyworld, and to maintain fan interest, one will be hard-pressed to expand the story, drawing details from canon and the original plot. However, one cannot just create a continuation or a companion story for the sake of increasing sales. As Jenkins claims, world-building is an art (116), and Long elaborates:

> [A] storyteller charged with creating a story open to eventual transmedia expansion should be aware that while the story he or she is currently writing may focus on one character, a different storyteller might focus on someone completely different, in a completely different era. The trick is to build enough compelling texture, opportunity and character into the larger world to bring audiences back again and again no matter what media form future extensions may take, and to do it gracefully (50).

One trick used by a lot of transmedia storytellers is the use of semiotic codes. These codes open up gates where fans and audiences can continue consuming a transmedia story. Semiotic codes act like allusions that point to another text, which readers may choose to read if they want a richer experience. From the idea of semiotic codes comes Long's notion of *negative capability* (53). He describes negative capability as potential plot-holes of a sort, calculated and intended to attract the audience's attention, leaving uncertainties that will compel them to seek answers. However, these may or may not be resolved by the creator.

Along with negative capability, something similar and complementary is the concept of *migratory cues* (Ruppel 61). These are signs in the story that will help the audience seek the answers by directing them to the transmedium site that possesses what they are looking for. While these two ideas come from separate scholars, Emma Beddows (46) treats the two as simply stages of a single process: negative capability serves as the potential trigger, and migratory cues serve as a vehicle for transfer.

All semiotics codes—negative capability and migratory cues included—used in linking transmedia are what Dena labels as *catalytic allusions* (277). Catalytic allusions are diegetic cues that establish connection between two or more transmedia sites, no matter the immediate relevance among each other in terms of narratives. In her dissertation, Beddows explains the idea further: "[t]he catalytic properties of the allusion allow the audiences to act upon the reference. This concept is therefore uniquely situated within a transmedia framework because it accounts for structured exploration across media rather than focusing simply on the referential function of allusion or intertextuality" (46). She goes on to state that while catalytic allusions and

the others still lack enough studies to prove their efficacy, they are still useful in transmedia research from a narrative perspective.

Negative Capability

Negative capability is a transmedia storytelling concept developed by Geoffrey Long (53) in his study of Jim Henson's transmedia stories. He borrowed the term *negative capability* from one of the letters of the poet John Keats, who described the idea to be suggestive of doubt and uncertainty. Appropriating it within the context of transmedia, Long modifies the concept of negative capability into the "art of building strategic gaps into a narrative to evoke a delicious sense of 'uncertainty, Mystery, or doubt' in the audience" (53).

Using negative capability on the study of Jim Henson films *The Dark Crystal* (1982) and *Labyrinth* (1986), Long broke the films down into scenes and listed all elements that can potentially be used as entry points for another connected narrative. These elements may be mentions of people, artifacts, or even the mere background; as long as they arouse curiosity from the audience, they can open up new pathways for the world and its stories.

Negative capability is similar to Marc Ruppel's migratory cues (61), Christy Dena's catalytic allusions (277), and Emma Beddows's transitional capacities and transitional thresholds (50) in that they present links, connections, and relationships between the hypotext—the point of departure—and the hypertext—the expanded element. However, Long insists that negative capability already fulfills its function as long as there is a potential for an expanded narrative; it does *not* necessarily have to be addressed in a new transmedia installment, unlike the concepts of Ruppel, Dena, and Beddows.

Semiotic Navigation of Transmedia Stories

Transmedia stories rely on the openness of their narrative elements—the hidden token-like quality of details—in order for producers and audiences alike to fill in these gaps, making these stories richer. Producers fulfill this endeavor by means of transmedia expansions; audiences can create their own fulfillment by writing fan fiction or something similar. This is why the concept of negative capability is crucial in transmedia stories. Jenkins, in

2003 and then in 2006, introduced transmedia as a concept, contemplating about the existing franchises that branch off the usual media business model, but he did not delve on a concrete "structural and dynamic model of transmedia […] that explains how transmedia structurally works and how we motivate audiences to travel across platforms" (Bastiaens and Bouwknegt, 1279). Understandably, at the time the idea had been fresh, but eventually many media scholars pitched in their studies on transmedia that address some of what Jenkins had not been able to examine.

Certain scholars, like Long and Bastiaens and Bouwknegt, propose that semiotics can provide a clear illustration of how a transmedia story is constructed and read by the audience. Because semiotics—Saussurean and Barthesian in particular—is structural in nature, it can offer the audience a way of navigating transmedia by presenting signs or codes embedded in a medium. It becomes a system that produces these codes that link intertextually with other media, encouraging an extensive and expansive media consumption that a single medium cannot accomplish (Bastiaens and Bouwknegt, 1282).

Barthes has explored this capacity early on by discussing the characteristic of a text that can be filled, interpreted, and re-interpreted by readers. As is by now well-known to scholars in the humanities and the social sciences, he distinguishes between two kinds of texts: one that is conducive for "re-writing"—that is, the quality of a text that can be re-interpreted by a consumer—and the other one is restricted by its own interpretation (4). The former is *writerly*; the latter, *readerly*. A writerly text allows readers to create their own assumptions on the text. Authorial intent, in this case, becomes obsolete. It is no longer the role of the author to dictate the reader on what the text means. There is a paradigm shift that treats the reader as "no longer a consumer, but a producer of text," as the famous "slogan" goes. (4). Meanwhile, a readerly text cannot accommodate the freedom a writerly text possesses, and thus it can only arrive until a certain point. Literature, for Barthes, should not isolate the text and the reader from each other. Instead, a harmonious relationship will be the ideal option.

While Barthes' main concern is in literature, his ideas can be applied to other media, especially in the concept of transmedia storytelling, and this is what the paper tries to undertake. Writerly texts operate in the same manner as negative capability: the quality of a text to evoke upon a reader an exploration of its world. Barthes might have already envisioned what Jenkins and Long have viewed transmedia storytelling to be:

> In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach* [original emphasis], they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language (5-6).

What Barthes sees of the writerly text is similar to Marshall McLuhan's concept of cool media. McLuhan, in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, categorizes media into two types: hot medium and cool medium. A hot medium is "high definition," one rife with data, while a cool medium is the opposite—"low definition" (22-23).

Being of low definition, cool media can afford spaces for details that the audience can fill for themselves. If this were applied to transmedia storytelling, the nature of cool medium will be tantamount to negative capability. The "lowness" of definition of a cool medium can be fulfilled by the media producer (through sequels and the like), or if left ignored, can be satisfied by the audience (through fan works). These potential spaces for details motivate Jenkins' concept of convergence culture (2). Especially with fans, the idea that there are informational gaps in the stories they read, films and TV series they watch, games they play, encourages them to create their own pieces of interpretation that complement (or challenge) the narratives in question.

Barthes then proceeds to analyze Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*, a short story about a castrati opera singer. In his book, *S/Z*, Barthes lists five

narrative codes that emerged from studying *Sarrasine*. These codes are the following: hermeneutic, semic, symbolic, cultural, and proairetic (19). Of the five codes, the hermeneutic code stands out due to its similarity with negative capability. He describes the hermeneutic code as the articulation of "a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer" (17). This code can take on many manifestations—suggestions, hints, formulations—and it can either be answered or left to anyone's guess. In it is the capacity of being expandable, in which the narrative can stretch the distance between desire and its fulfilment (Modleski 29). For example, Modleski cites soap operas as a nest of hermeneutic codes. She links Barthes with soap operas in that the medium creates narrative expectations: cliffhangers, mysteries, questions at the end of each episode. But these expectations are not entirely fulfilled because soap operas are serial in nature and they do not end. As Modleski writes, accurately, "tune in tomorrow, not in order to find out the answers, but to see what further complications will defer the resolutions and introduce new questions" (29).

Similar with Modleski's argument, Long provides an example of incorporating Barthes' writerly text into transmedia storytelling: "The trick […] is to use these writerly approaches as a lure to bring audiences back when those gaps are filled in, and then provide a tale good enough—and riddled with enough new gaps—to keep them coming back for more" (59). He continues that hermeneutic codes are "the most directly connected to negative capability" (62). The very nature of hermeneutic codes allows audiences to maintain engagement with the text, to make them ask questions and seek answers within the text. From this basis, Long has classified the Barthesian hermeneutic code into six types: cultural, chronological, character, geographic, environmental, and ontological. These six hermeneutic codes serve as a means to unravel the negative capability of a text.

The Grave Bandits (2012)

The Grave Bandits (2012) is a zombie-genre, independent film that revolves around the orphaned brothers Romy and Peewee. The film follows the

brothers, who make a living by looting in cemeteries after they were forced to run away from the townspeople who could no longer tolerate their crimes. In their escape, they end up in an island infested with zombies. Faced with a new problem, Romy and Peewee use their resources to defend themselves and survive, and at the same time to save an island native who is a link to the zombie infestation plaguing the island.

The film was written, directed, and produced by Tyrone Acierto, a Filipino-American filmmaker based in Chicago. He founded Paper Boat Pictures, a film company, with his co-producer Vanessa Ulgado.

Acierto and Ulgado collaborated with Haexagon Concepts, a Hong Kong-based creative IP management and development agency led by transmedia producer Marco Sparmberg, to market the film, build an audience pre-release, and manage the transmedia expansion that would follow. Several transmedia extensions surrounding the film had been outlined: the first phase included audience-building, utilizing social media to cultivate engagement with the film; the second phase included upcoming mobile games, online community, energy drink, comic books, adventure tour, and television series to supplement the main story of the film (Sparmberg, "The Grave Bandits DNA Map").

The Grave Bandits as a transmedia story is still incomplete as of this writing. According to the film's Facebook page, the production team is still selecting a comic artist to draw the comic book prequel of the film. Other transmedia extensions, particularly the television series and mobile games, have yet to be announced.

The Grave Bandits as Transmedia Storytelling

Originally, *The Grave Bandits* was exclusively a film, but after meeting with Marco Sparmberg, CEO of Haexagon Concepts, a Hong Kong-based company that "provides one-stop solutions for any media- and movie-related project, from conception to production to implementation of transmedia content" (Paper Boat Pictures and Haexagon Concepts 1), the idea for transmedia storytelling was born.

While presenting the transmedia project pitch at the *Fantastic Film Lab, Fantastic Film School—Punchon International Film Festival 2012*, Paper Boat Pictures and Haexagon Concepts introduced three main titles: *The Grave Bandits* film, the comic book *Red Moon*, and the mobile phone game application *The Grave Bandits* and *Zombie Pirates*. Details and information on these three titles are written in a "brand bible," which makes Acierto—and to an extent, Ulgado—the "transmedia czar" (Dena 129).

The Grave Bandits, the feature film, is the main narrative from which the two extensions were drawn. *Red Moon* is a comic book prequel written by Tyrone Acierto. Set a year before the events of the film, it follows Professor William Seabrook and his colleague Doctor Sarah Bergman as they are chosen by the US Center for Scientific Research to investigate the origins of life. *Red Moon* covers the backstories of the character William Seabrook and the ancient gemstone that houses the alien virus which plagued the island in the Philippines.

The Grave Bandits and Zombie Pirates is a zombie game application sequel that picks up where the film left off. It is written by Vanessa Ulgado and will be developed by Komikasi, a game developer company. In this game, Romy, Peewee, and Maiya battle zombies once more when they find out that the zombies are swimming towards China.

Exploring Transmediation in *The Grave Bandits*

This paper attempts to lay bare possible entry points for transmediation in *The Grave Bandits* through hermeneutic analysis. King posits that a reader's subjectivity is "central to the accounts of interpretation" (213) and that textual meaning is established "between real readers and texts" (Staiger qtd. in King 213). In other words, as is now generally understood, the text has no inherent meaning; it is the reader who plays a key role in the construction of the text's meaning.

The application of hermeneutics to this study is derived from Geoffrey Long's method of extracting negative capability by adopting Roland Barthes' narrative codes (19). In reading Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes drew five narrative codes that highlight an enigma, an element that establishes a

mystery or allusion, grabbing the reader's attention and curiosity and making him or her seek an answer as the story progresses. Of the five codes, only hermeneutic codes are useful for Long's analytic method. It is the hermeneutic code that establishes the enigma through distinction, suggestion, and formulation in the story, "held in suspense, and finally disclosed" (Barthes 19). However, Barthes is quick to add that the abovementioned terms do not occur all the time.

An enigma may not be answered in the story itself, which is what Long emphasizes in his discussion of transmedia storytelling and negative capability. As long as the enigma is planted, negative capability fulfills its function, and this opens up for a possible transmedial process. Deriving from Barthes's hermeneutic codes, Long came up with his own six classes of hermeneutic codes. He defined them as:

1. **Cultural**. It consists of codes that pertain to the cultures, such as architecture, clothing, rituals, artwork, and the like.
2. **Character**. It indicates "characters or aspects of characters that do not appear on screen" (Long, 64).
3. **Chronological**. It refers to past or future events hinted or mentioned in the story.
4. **Geographic**. It refers to places that have been suggested, hinted at, or appeared briefly in the story.
5. **Environmental**. It pertain to the species of plants, animals, and other biological and life-sciences-related aspects of the world.
6. **Ontological**. It enables the audience to "wonder about the very existential nature of the story they're consuming" (Long 65). Such stories consist of elements that break the fourth wall, for example, or follow logic that is different from the real world.

What Long did, and what this paper has tried to undertake, is to read the film scene by scene, taking care to detect all possible enigmas that it presents. These enigmas are articulated through questions, and are categorized according to Long's six hermeneutic codes. Drawing from Long's elaboration, this study has constructed a matrix for the analysis, which includes the film's scene, description, identification of codes, the articulation of enigmas, and scene interpretation.

Hermeneutic Codes as Vessels for Potential Transmediation

In this research, *The Grave Bandits*' negative capabilities emerge through Long's method. These codes explore, scene by scene, the narrative aspects as well as the possible entry points for further transmedia expansion of *The Grave Bandits* as a transmedia project. Among these six codes, character codes are the most prominent, implying that the film relies on its characters to establish mysteries and enigmas. For one such instance, early in the film there is a scene where Peewee, the younger protagonist, shakes a radio into functioning. As he is performing the action, his watch falls from his wrist. It turns out that this watch has a picture of a smiling lady. Peewee panics and hastily retrieves it; this leaves the viewer wondering about the identity of the lady and her relationship with Peewee, based on the swiftness with which Peewee takes the wristwatch back with him. As Long has maintained in his study, character codes manifest when a character is mentioned or hinted at, or there is an allusion to an aspect of a character. In this case, the lady in the picture is Peewee's mother, answered ten minutes later, punctuated by his line, "To find my mother." But not all codes are answered in the film. Peewee's partner, Romy, is confronted with a similar treatment: conversely, Romy declares that he has no relatives. This engenders in the minds of the audience questions regarding Romy's relatives. Such backstories can be good fuel for further transmedia expansion.

Other hermeneutic codes are not as frequent as the character code, however. Environmental codes come second. These codes mostly pertain to virus-related questions, considering that Long includes in environmental codes many elements that can relate to science (65). In the film, the virus is studied by William Seabrook, a scientist researching on the meteorite that fell into the island. Cultural codes refer to cultural artifacts of the fictional world. One such question addressed in the film is the island tribe's legend. It can be said that, because the legend is tied with the meteorite, the meteorite, too, is a cultural artifact. Although the question is answered at different moments in the film, it only provides a brief summary of the past, not providing the full context of the legend. Chronological codes in the film mostly address the island's past, particularly the tribe that lived in

it. Geographic codes refer to the island itself and the places mentioned in the film, such as Romy and Peewee's life in Manila.

The last code, ontological, addresses the question of the film's genre itself. Halfway through the film, after Romy and Peewee are chased by the zombies, Peewee encounters the third protagonist, Maiya, hiding in a cave. Peewee fills Maiya in with details on how he and Romy came to the island. It is at that moment when the word *zombie* is first mentioned in the film. Meanwhile, William Seabrook, who is with Romy at the time, says that the zombies in the island are "not really zombies" and that the zombies are merely "myth, glamorized by Hollywood." The film subtly jabs at the Hollywood zombie movies such as *World War Z* and *Warm Bodies*. So the questions that arose address the nature of the zombies in the film itself and—if those zombies are truly not the zombies people know—what should they be called. The first question is answered, as it has been said that the 'zombification' is actually an alien virus, and has nothing to do with the mythical zombie. The second question, however, is not answered, which allows the film to maintain the mystery of the zombies throughout and beyond the medium. This may encourage the audience to question the nature of zombies themselves.

In determining *The Grave Bandits*' potential entry points for transmedia expansions, the points are phrased as questions. Some of them are answered within the film, while some are left unanswered. Unanswered questions, then, can be addressed in a transmedia expansion (Long 68). All the question sets are categorized according to their common elements, since many questions posed refer to a recurring object or character. Based on their commonalities, the matrix has produced eight categories for the kinds of questions that emerged in the film.

"The meteorite, the virus, and the legend" refers to all details pertaining to the meteorite, including the alien virus it houses, the tribe that found the meteorite, and the fate of that tribe. "William Seabrook" encompasses all things related to the scientist—his backstory, his motivations, his work and research, and his connection to the meteorite. "Peewee and Peewee's mother" explores the relationship between Peewee and the lady in the picture, hidden in his wristwatch. "Maiya" asks questions all related to Maiya—her skills,

her connection with the tribe, her abilities, and so on. "Romy, Peewee, and stealing" focuses more on Romy, his history, and his relationship with Peewee in the context of grave robbing. "King and his pirates" concentrates on the pirates who kidnapped Maiya, and their leader, King. "Zombies and their nature," while connected with the meteorite, strictly inquires onto the nature of zombies and their capabilities and superhuman characteristics. Finally, "the mob" centers on the group of townspeople pursuing Romy and Peewee. Table 1 illustrates these further.

Table 1 Categories of the kinds of questions obtained in *The Grave Bandits* and their frequency

Questions	Number	Answered
The meteorite, the virus, and the legend	18	8
William Seabrook	22	11
Peewee and Peewee's mother	20	10
Maiya	16	8
Romy, Peewee, and stealing	29	5
King and his pirates	10	6
Zombies and their nature	13	7
The mob	9	4
Totals	137	59

Table 1 shows that there are one hundred and thirty-seven sets of questions that can pose as entry points for transmediation. Among the 137 sets of questions, fifty-nine are answered in the film. The category with most questions is "Romy, Peewee, and stealing," with twenty-nine questions revolving around it; followed by "William Seabrook" with twenty-two questions; "Peewee and Peewee's mother" counting up to twenty. However, when it comes to the answered questions it is "William Seabrook" that has been addressed the most, with eleven answers. "Peewee and Peewee's mother" comes in a close second with ten answers. It can be said that *The Grave Bandits*

does not focus so much on the zombies themselves but on the characters, especially on William Seabrook and Peewee and his search for his mother.

Based on the unfolding plot of the film, Seabrook's character and the meteorite are entwined. Questions arise about the relationship between Seabrook and the gemstone. While some questions surrounding them have been answered, there are still many aspects about Seabrook and the gemstone that have not yet been explored by the film. These are then transferred to the comic book prequel *Red Moon*. According to Paper Boat Pictures and Haexagon Concepts' proposal, *Red Moon* focuses on William Seabrook and his group of researchers traveling to the Philippines to study about the meteorite. In this prequel, the questions posed in the film can be answered.

Apart from *Red Moon*, Paper Boat Pictures and Haexagon Concepts (2012) planned on releasing a zombie game application, *The Grave Bandits and Zombie Pirates*, which takes place after the events of the feature film. During the last part of the film, Romy, Peewee, and Maiya have managed to push the zombies off the pirate boat and escape. The zombies that know how to swim have remained on the sea, and the zombie game plays with this idea: since the zombies in this universe can swim, the zombies fended off by the three main characters do not stop with them—the zombies continue to swim until they find more prey. The zombie game plot indicates that these zombies have kept on swimming all the way to China; Romy and Peewee learn of this and enlist Maiya's assistance to stop them all over again.

Other than the planned transmedia projects, there are still plenty of things to explore in the world of *The Grave Bandits*. *Red Moon* may answer the questions posed about the meteorite, the virus, and the legend, and William Seabrook, while *The Grave Bandits and the Zombie Pirates* might attempt to answer questions about zombies and their nature, and King and his pirates, but the rest—such as Maiya's and Romy's backstories—are still full of transmedia extension potential and can be springs for further expansion.

Conclusion

The Grave Bandits as a transmedia project is still incomplete; future transmedia installments have yet to be announced. Since this study only focuses on the

potential transmediation of the main film, hermeneutic codes have served well enough to determine the negative capability of the story. The results and interpretation show that *The Grave Bandits*' entry points rested primarily on character codes. Character aspects such as backstories and hinted abilities are great ideas for further narrative expansions, which are usually what major media productions are undertaking, and the greatest number of enigmas in *The Grave Bandits* pointed to Romy, Peewee, and stealing.

The film introduced Romy as one of the main protagonists, but where he came from and how he ended up as a grave robber are only alluded to in the film, thereby portraying him as a totally mysterious character. With only a hinted past, and one of the least answered enigmas, Romy is a treasure trove of potential transmediation. Enigmas revolving around William Seabrook and the meteorite have the second greatest number. According to the film producer, Vanessa Ulgado, the comic book *Red Moon* will address a number of the questions raised about the character William Seabrook.

As the field of transmedia studies is still growing, a notable number of its research concentrate on the elements of production and business, and transmedia applications to other industries. There have been, indeed, several explorations on the storytelling side of transmedia, mostly conceptual, such as Long's thesis; however, there is a need for more studies that apply these transmedia storytelling concepts in real-life projects (Beddows, 45), which this study endeavored to achieve.[1] Here in the Philippines, researches on transmedia are relatively few and far between, but they are growing.

Notes

1. There have been studies that explored transmediality on many media franchises, but several of them, such as *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*, have existed way before Jenkins coined the term *transmedia*. A lot of these studies treated the aforementioned media franchises as transmedia retroactively, but I'm talking about titles that consider themselves transmedia projects from the point of their inception. Some examples include Square Enix's *Final Fantasy XV* and Jacqueline Olive's *Always in Season Island*.

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