

Copyright © 2023 by Cherkas Global University



Published in the USA
 Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)
 Has been issued since 2005
 ISSN 1994-4160
 E-ISSN 1994-4195
 2023. 19(1): 3-9

DOI: 10.13187/me.2023.1.3
<https://me.cherkasgu.press>



Qanon as a Transmedia Storytelling

Leila Algavi ^a, Irina Volkova ^{a, *}, George Kovalev ^a, Grigory Budtsov ^a

^a Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Russian Federation

Abstract

The communicative nature of QAnon's most ambitious contemporary conspiracy theory is the focus of this study. According to some preliminary speculation, QAnon's incredible popularity lies in its superficial resemblance to an alternate reality game and a live-action role-playing game. This is true, but the authors present a system of arguments proving that QAnon is primarily a transmedia project with all its inherent properties. Analysis of the QAnon open narrative system reveals the mechanisms of its work and sheds light on its prospects. The question of the spontaneity or purposefulness of the QAnon project remains unclear, the authors left it out of the equation, since this is not so much a scientific problem as a socio-political one. The authors preface their analysis with a reflection on conspiracy theory, which is essential for understanding the phenomenon under study. It is emphasised that there is a close link between conspiracy thinking and other ways of making sense of reality, in the humanities and social sciences it is traditional to identify the hidden motives behind what is happening. The content of conspiracy narratives usually has predictable elements. QAnon conspiracy theory has been found to follow all seven principles of transmedia narrative.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, Qanon, transmedia storytelling, Donald Trump, "rabbit holes".

1. Introduction

The idea for this article came from an assumption by American game designer Reed Berkowitz (Berkowitz, 2020), that the incredible popularity of the newest conspiracy theory QAnon lies in its obvious similarities with the alternate reality game (ARG) and live-action role-playing game (LARP). It is reasonable that, such a statement required double-checking. The fact is that the ARG phenomenon can be perceived as a manipulative means, and hence actualize the ethical problems of gamification (Marczewski, 2017; Volkova, 2018) which in turn emphasize the need to develop media competencies (Camarero et al., 2019).

But as we began to analyze this conspiracy theory more closely for the characteristics of ARG and LARP, we increasingly detected signs of a transmedia narrative and consequently increasingly concluded that QAnon conspiracy theory is essentially a transmedia project.

Recent studies have shown, first, that conspiracy thinking was widespread among intellectual and political elites in previous centuries (Bratich, 2008; Butter, 2014; McKenzie-McHarg, 2019; Zwiernlein, 2013); secondly, there is a close connection between conspiracy thinking and other more "legitimate" ways of making sense of reality, in particular, the goal of many critical studies in the humanities and social sciences is to reveal the hidden motives of events (Boltanski, 2014).

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: irma-irma@mail.ru (I.I. Volkova)

For our further study, the most important will be following theses:

1) Conspiracy theories are not the same thing as conspiracies. A conspiracy is an actual plot planned and/or carried out by two or more people. Conspiracy theories are thought constructs based on a conspiracy worldview. The conspiracy worldview, as the American religious scholar and political scientist Michael Barkun rightly points out, assumes that "the universe is governed by design rather than by randomness" (Barkun, 2013: 8), and proceeds from three principles (Table 1).

Table 1. The three Barkun's principles

Nothing happens by accident	"Conspiracy theories imply a world based on intentionality, from which accident and coincidence are excluded. Anything that happens occurs because it has been willed" (Barkun, 2013: 8).
Nothing is as it seems	"The appearance of innocence is deemed to be no guarantee that an individual or group is benign" (Barkun, 2013: 8).
Everything is connected	Since there are no coincidences, patterns can be found everywhere, even though they are hidden from view.

2) Thought constructions are formalized in the form of narratives - stories that people tell in an attempt to interpret socially significant events, certain historical phenomena, or even the course of history as a whole. The content of conspiracy narratives usually has predictable elements.

3) Conspiracy narratives, just like narratives in general, can be deployed in a great number of formats: in words, graphics, memes, audio or video, games. And since we have mentioned games here, it should be said that conspiracy theories are often compared to them (Yablokov, 2020).

2. Materials and methods

To confirm our hypothesis that QAnon is, in fact, a transmedia project, we will first define its distinguishing attributes.

The term transmedia was first used in the book *Playing with Power*. The author, Marsha Kinder, used it in collocation "transmedia intertextuality" that defined "a specific network[s] of intertextuality constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture who are either fictional [...] or "real" as Garfield or the Ninja Turtles" (Kinder, 1991: 122).

The term "transmedia storytelling" was introduced into scientific discourse by American media researcher Henry Jenkins in 2006 in his book *Convergent Culture* (Jenkins, 2006).

Jenkins defined it as "a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction." (Jenkins, 2006: 95-96). So, summarizing many definitions that appeared after *Convergence Culture* was published, we should establish that "transmedia storytelling is the process of creating open narrative systems (a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins, 2007) consisting of an endless series of relatively autonomous episodes conjoined by a common universe or recurring character. These episodes get created and dispersed across multiple delivery channels using several (ideally, the more, the better) information and communication technologies (media), as well as non-ICT means. At the same time, the general narrative has to be constructed in such a way that

- a) allows for an extension of new information about the characters;
- b) allows for introduction of new characters;
- c) allows for a new development of the plot;
- d) does not duplicate with other media an experience that has already been experienced once (i.e., to create a unique experience);
- e) avoids contradictions;
- f) and, ideally, allows for widespread fan participation in the creation of the universe of history (Algavi, Al-Khanaki, 2020: 25-26).

Table 2. The attributes of the transmedia project, which G. Jenkins called the "seven core concepts of transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins, 2009), include:

spreadability vs. drillability	the qualities of a story that determine the course of audience engagement in the narrative process: the horizontal or vertical level
continuity vs. multiplicity	the principles imply two different interpretive strategies: following the canon or creating alternate plot arcs
immersion vs. extractability	these properties are responsible for the interaction between history and the audience's everyday experience
worldbuilding	is the primary goal of transmedia narrative, which is ultimately nothing less than an open narrative system-the totality of all available fragments based on an expanding diegetic world and its lore
seriality	the principle that determine the structure of the narrative system
subjectivity	"the point of view from which the story is told or from which the event of the story is perceived by the protagonist" (Tamarchenko, 2001)
performance	a quality that actualizes the function of a cultural attractor, enabling the audience to collaborate in creating a transmedia story

So we have begun to detect these particular attributes in the QAnon conspiracy theory.

3. Discussion

The main plot of QAnon as it took shape by the fall of 2022 is simple: there are dark forces, the so-called "Satanic Cabal", that has been nurturing a sinister plan to seize power over the world and destroy humanity for millennia. After World War II, they managed to establish control over most of the world leaders and persuaded them to transfer some of their countries' sovereignty to supranational structures, created, incidentally, with the consent and direct participation of these very countries' leaders.

However, the forces of light do not slumber, and to fight against the "satanic cabal" during the presidency of J.F. Kennedy, a secret group of high-ranking military officers and scientists was formed, which "assists humanity bringing us to a shared timeline of Light" (In5D, 2019), along the lines of J.R.R. Tolkien's "White Council". This group got known among QAnon supporters as the White Hats. Sixty years after its founding, they finally chose a leader capable of leading a crusade against the dark forces: Donald Trump. Of course, Donald Trump will not be alone in this final battle. Some world leaders and warlords "started to realize what was happening and decided to plan a takeover of this global Cabal who have destroyed our planet through their wars" (In5D, 2019), and openly or discretely decided to support the 45th President of the United States in his fight. And then, as in any heroic epic, Donald Trump and his associates and supporters go through a series of challenges sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful, and there is no end in sight to the struggle between good and evil. To date, the main narrative of QAnon has been formed around a key event: the storm.

Conventionally, the story can be divided into three phases:

- 1) the calm before the storm,
- 2) the storming of the Capitol (the supposed storm), and
- 3) the calm.

With each stage, the narrative shapes anew. We can say that the story develops according to a standard structure: the beginning, the development, and the climax, although there is no finale as such.

The first stage is the active spread of the conspiracy theory. User Q (the puppet-master) outlined the boundaries of the world of QAnon, and, in turn, users of Internet forums filled it with content. After a certain period in time, the story had main characters and their opponents, a deeply integrated out storyworld.

The second phase can be called a climax. After Joe Biden's victory during the 2021 presidential election, his rival, former U.S. President Donald Trump called on his supporters, among whom were QAnon followers, not to recognize the results of the vote. On January 6, 2021, a crowd of protesters broke through U.S. Capitol security and occupied part of the building for several hours.

One of the most famous supporters of the widespread U.S. conspiracy movement QAnon, Jacob Chanceley, a QAnon shaman, has been sentenced to 41 months in prison for his part in the Capitol takeover.

The third stage is marked by the splinting of the general narrative. Although the main stories in the QAnon cycle are still centered on Trump, parallel stories corpus takes shape, since in the emerging lore Trump's predecessor was none other than John F. Kennedy, and Trump's crusade itself was preceded by a series of events, also reflected in the QAnon lore, and spin-offs and crossovers. As a result, QA is increasingly beginning to build on the principle of seriality, that is, by branching narratives into episodes, each of which contains intrigue (for example, where did Q go in late 2017 and why did he return to 4chan in June 2022), motivating the viewer to return to the story and its next episodes.

4. Results

The emergence of QAnon was preceded by the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. It originated in November 2016 after John Podesta's emails were leaked (in May 2016) and published on Wikileaks (in November of that year), which conspiracy theorists believed contained ciphered information detailing child sexual abuse (Rothschild, 2021). The conspiracy thinkers claimed that high-ranking members of the Democratic Party sexually abused children at a pizza parlor in Washington, D.C. Claims of child sexual abuse and the primary role of the Clinton family in that abuse became a key part of the QAnon beliefs, but over time the role of the Clintons diminished in favor of more general conspiracy claims. The world's elite of child traffickers came to the fore, using them for sexual exploitation (Kang, Frenkel, 2020). This example shows us how QAnon can introduce new characters: it integrates various conspiracy theories and can transform the main narrative. While initially, the "protagonists" were Hillary Clinton, her family members, and her inner circle, during the time Donald Trump took their place as a fighter against the evil of the world.

Although QAnon's conspiracy theory almost immediately received into itself Pizzagate, it went much further, incorporating elements from other conspiracy theories. This allows the narrative to form new details about the characters. One of the earliest rumors spread by QAnon followers was that Hillary Clinton, her daughter Chelsea, and Senator John McCain had been accused of child abuse in the past and had even been arrested. Later, other rumors began to spread within QAnon – for example, followers of the conspiracy theory claimed that there was some "snuff" video of Hillary Clinton and her aide Huma Abedin killing a child and drinking its blood (Emery, 2018).

It's obvious, that the original narrative of The Storm emerged and took shape from the suggestion to follow Huma. In addition to the belief that the country is led by some group ("the deep state") that has given the country up to plunder and desecration by a secret world government, there are elements of messianism in QA. QA supporters believe in the arrival of the true president, who, with the help of loyal politicians from the secret international group "White Hats" and the "loyal" military, can defeat the "deep state" and restore U.S. sovereignty. Two eschatological narratives stand out in this story: The Great Tribulation and Judgment Day. It is these that have expanded The Storm narrative and incorporated many other conspiracy theories into it, thus making QA a super conspiracy theory according to Michael Barkun's classification (Barkun, 2013).

We can see that each particular conspiracy theory, while possessing a certain degree of autonomy, is an "entry point" for obtaining a general view of the conspiracy (Palmer, Petroski, 2016). We can then move from one theory to another, from the periphery to the core, or from the core down to the periphery, choosing our way and determining in what order we want to get to

know the story. "The point of entry" or "rabbit hole" is a metaphorical door that opens the passage from the real world to the fictional world (Jones, 2008).

Such a structure of the QAnon general narrative allows, with the right approach, to avoid repeating past experiences, as "rabbit holes" have a significant feature that is a spontaneous and unplanned nature. It manifests itself in the following way. The Twitter account of the strategic command of the U.S. Armed Forces has published a tweet with the strange content of ";l;;gmlxzssaw". This message became especially popular in the circles of QAnon supporters. They believed that the text contained a ciphered message about the status of Q. One of the decryptations was the text "Q ACQUITTED" (Thalen, 2021). Thus, the involved users, guided by the abstract notions of the "fighter against world evil", create "rabbit holes" for new supporters.

In some cases, because of the spontaneous nature of "entry points," this can lead to the duplication of the experience, still, the process in which content is created by the players, not the author, allows QAnon to develop on its own, despite the wishes of the one who launched the project.

As Sascha Lobo, a columnist for Der Spiegel magazine who specializes in Internet-related topics puts it the ability to add new details to the QAnon puzzle was a key factor in turning it into "the most successful and most dangerous modern conspiracy theory on the Web" (Lobo, 2020)

From this comes another important feature of transmedia projects: subjectivity. In order for subjectivity to emerge, extension are incorporated into the project (in our case, any integrated stories that differ from the main narrative), which can help reveal unknown aspects of the story's world, expand the timeline, and show the story of secondary characters. Such extensions provide the viewer with a subjective experience of the story.

The story proved significant and appealing to the audience, so users began, on the one hand, to share it with their acquaintances on social networks, the blogosphere, forums, chat rooms, etc., so the information got dispersed across multiple delivery channels. And on the other hand, "digging deeper," commenting, evaluating, looking for missing details, hidden motives and connections, and framing theories.

Thus, the first thing that catches the attention is the properties of QAnon that Jenkins has pointed out as integral to transmedia projects – spreadability and drillability, i.e. the ability of the story to engage the public in the creation and distribution of content across social networks, increasing its economic and cultural value.

In addition, QAnon has the property of extractability. It allows its followers to take certain aspects of conspiracy theory away "as resources they deploy in the spaces of their everyday life" (Jenkins, 2007). It is also the basis for the new stories' creation in QAnon. People project their experiences onto other aspects of their everyday social or political life and try to look for patterns where there may not be any.

QAnon's narrative has expanded beyond the U.S. and found supporters in many countries around the world. Collaborative creativity and widespread fan participation in the creation of the universe make it possible to change its narrative structures but still remain within the framework of the created world. In Germany, these views are presented by the "Reichsbürgers," in Britain by Brexit supporters. The British QAnon activists called ex-Prime Minister Boris Johnson an ally of Trump, the "savior of the world."

Broad fan participation in the creation and expansion of QAnon is one of the major drivers in its spreading, and thus in "winning" a new audience.

Although QAnon supporters often use platforms such as social networks or discussion boards, their activities occasionally require not just virtual contributions. In Jenkins' classification, the QAnon, like some other transmedia projects, uses fan performance.

On November 2, 2021, several hundred supporters of the QAnon gathered in Dallas, at the site of John F. Kennedy's assassination, in anticipation of the appearance of JFK Jr. Although the son of the 35th President of the United States died in a plane crash in 1999, proponents of the conspiracy theory believe his death was staged 22 years ago, so now he is to appear to reveal the secret (Dickson, Monacelli, 2021).

However, within QAnon, it is hard to avoid contradictions outside the general narrative. It is due to the ability of followers to develop, deepen, and expand the plot as they see fit. Contradictions among QAnon supporters can be seen, for example, in the context of an ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

For example, the image of Russian President V. Putin in QAnon was initially positive, as he rejects the New World Order, the very idea of global government, and promotes national

sovereignty. He also supports a revival of Christianity in Russia and often emphasizes its importance to a moral and sustainable society. But this has changed since the conflict began. Followers have emerged notably John Sabal (known as QAnon John), who condemns V. Putin and his actions.

Several interpretations of what is happening have emerged: some believe that the fighting is a psyop, or a movie, while others believed that Ukraine was attacked by another country under the Russian flag (Gilbert, 2022).

5. Conclusion

QAnon has features integral for transmedia projects. So summarizing the results, we highlight the following points.

1. Supporters of QAnon actively use social networks and various forums to discuss or promote new ideas, so the Qanon narrative has a quality of spreadability.
2. The abundance of material on different platforms creates a sense of continuity.
3. Some alternative versions of the narrative get dispersed across multiple platforms, and people choose which alternatives they will believe, which represents subjectivity.
4. QAnon uses game mechanics very similar to alternate reality games to engage (immersion) audiences.
5. The QAnon narrative has the property of extractability, that is, it allows people to derive from conspiracy theory some elements that they will project into their daily lives.
6. QAnon is constructed on seriality, that is, the division of the story into episodes, each of which contains an intrigue that motivates the viewer to return to the story and its next sequences.
7. QAnon pays special attention to worldbuilding. The world of story is quite stable, and other conspiracy theories can be successfully integrated into it, suggesting multiplicity.
8. QAnon, like some other transmedia projects, uses performance with audience participation.

References

- Algavi, Al-Khanaki, 2020 – Algavi, L.O., Al-Khanaki, D.A-N. (2020). Fenomen transmedia [The phenomenon of transmedia]. In: *Mediakommunikacii i internet-marketing v usloviyah cifrovoj civilizacii*. Cheljabinsk. [in Russian]
- Barkun, 2013 – Barkun, M. (2013). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. University of California Press. DOI: 10.1525/9780520956520
- Berkowitz, 2020 – Berkowitz, R.A (2020). Game Designer's Analysis of QAnon. Playing with reality. *Medium.com*. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://medium.com/curiouserstitute/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon-580972548be5>
- Boltanski, 2014 – Boltanski, L. (2014). *Mysteries and conspiracies: detective stories, spy novels and the making of modern societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bratich, 2008 – Bratich, J.Z. (2008). *Conspiracy panics: political rationality and popular culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press
- Brett, 2021 – Brett, N. (2021). Moments of Political Gameplay: Game Design as a Mobilization Tool for Far-Right Action. In: *Rise of the Far Right: Technologies of Recruitment and Mobilization*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Butter, 2014 – Butter, M. (2014). *Plots, designs, and schemes: American conspiracy theories from the puritans to the present*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter. DOI: 10.1515/9783110346930
- Camarero et al., 2019 – Camarero, E., Fedorov, A., Levitskaya, A. (2019). Audiovisual and media literacy for social change. In: Velázquez, J.A.M., Pulido, C.M. (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Positive Communication Contributions of an Emerging Community of Research on Communication for Happiness and Social Change*. Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315207759-37
- Dickson, Monacelli, 2021 – Dickson, E., Monacelli, S. (2021). QAnon Believers Flock to Dallas for the Grand Return of JFK Jr. *Rolling Stone*, 2 Nov. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/qanon-kennedy-jfk-jr-dealey-plaza-dallas-1251929>
- Emery, 2018 – Emery, D. (2018). Is a Hillary Clinton 'Snuff Film' Circulating on the Dark Web? *Snopes*. 16 Apr. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clinton-snuff-film/>

- Gilbert, 2022** – *Gilbert, D.* (2022). Here's Why QAnon Believes Vladimir Putin Is the Good Guy. *Vice.com*. 22 March. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93bqxd/qanon-russia-putin>
- In5D, 2019** – *In5D.* (2019) White Hat Takeover! *In5D*. 17 July. [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://in5d.com/white-hat-takeover>
- Jenkins, 2009** – *Jenkins, H.* (2009). Revenge of the Oragami Unicorn: Seven Core Concepts of Transmedia Storytelling. *Henryjenkins.org*. [Electronic resource]. URL: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html
- Jenkins, 2009** – *Jenkins, H.* (2009). Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: The Remaining Four Principles of Transmedia Storytelling. *Henryjenkins.org*. [Electronic resource]. URL: http://henryjenkins.org/2009/12/revenge_of_the_origami_unicorn.html
- Jenkins, 2006** – *Jenkins, H.* (2006). Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press. DOI: 10.18574/nyu/9780814743683.001.0001
- Jenkins, 2007** – *Jenkins, H.* (2007). Transmedia storytelling 101. *Henryjenkins.org*. [Electronic resource]. URL: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html
- Jones, 2008** – *Jones, S.E.* (2008). The meaning of video games: Gaming and textual strategies. Routledge.
- Kang, Frenkel, 2020** – *Kang C., Frenkel S.* (2020). "PizzaGate" Conspiracy Theory Thrives Anew in the TikTok Era. *The New York Times*, 27 Jun. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/technology/pizzagate-justin-bieber-qanon-tiktok.html>
- Kinder, 1991** – *Kinder, M.* (1991). Playing with power in movies, television, and video games: from Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. University of California Press. DOI: 10.1525/9780520912434
- Lobo, 2020** – *Lobo, S.* (2020). Verschwörungs-Ideologie zum Mitmachen. *Spiegel Netzwelt*, 5 Aug. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/qanon-verschwoerungsideologie-zum-mitmachen-a-8656ef8e-b2dc-4b90-a09f-8cb6e4a4db19>
- Marczewski, 2017** – *Marczewski, A.* (2017). The ethics of gamification. *XRDS: Crossroads, The ACM Magazine for Students*. 24(1): 56-59. DOI: 10.1145/3123756
- McKenzie-McHarg, 2018** – *McKenzie-McHarg, A.* (2018). Conspiracy theory: The nineteenth-century prehistory of a twentieth-century concept. In: *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*. Oxford University Press: 62-81. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0004
- Palmer, Petroski, 2016** – *Palmer, C., Petroski, A.* (2016). *Alternate Reality Games: gamification for performance*. CRC Press. DOI: 10.1201/b19515
- Rothschild, 2021** – *Rothschild, M.* (2021). The storm is upon us: How QAnon became a movement, cult, and conspiracy theory of everything. Hachette UK.
- Tamarchenko, 2001** – Teoreticheskaya poetika: Ponyatiya i opredeleniya: Hrestomatiya dlya studentov [Theoretical Poetics: Concepts and Definitions: A Reader's Digest for Students]. 2001. Moscow. [in Russian]
- Thalen, 2021** – *Thalen, M.* (2021). That Gibberish tweet from U.S. Strategic command came from a child. *Dailybot.com*. [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.dailybot.com/debug/gibberish-tweet-u-s-strategic-command-child>
- Volkova, 2018** – *Volkova, I.* (2018). Jekrannye igrovyje kommunikacii kak indikator vosprijatija mediareal'nosti: statusno-pokolencheskij aspekt [Screen-based game communications as an indicator of the perception of media reality: the social status & generation aspect]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Serija 10. Zhurnalistika*. 4: 124-138. [in Russian]. DOI: 10.30547/vestnik.journ.4.2018.124138
- Yablokov, 2020** – *Yablokov, I.* (2020). Russkaya kul'tura zagovora: konspiologicheskie teorii na postsovet'skom prostranstve [Russian culture of conspiracy: conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space]. Moscow. [in Russian]
- Zwierlein, 2013** – *Zwierlein, C.* (2013). Security Politics and Conspiracy Theories in the emerging European state system (15th/16th c.). *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*. 38 1(143): 65-95.