

Fish are Friends, Not Food:

How Harry Styles' Adore You music video exemplifies a transmedia marketing campaign in the
digital age

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The sea is a vast place that transcends and encompasses all lands. Inside this mystery lies the frown-shaped island known as *Eroda*, where no one smiles, and people only leave on even-numbered days. *Eroda* is the focal point for Harry Styles' 2019 music video, *Adore You* from his sophomore album *Fine Line*. The video begins with a prelude narrated by singer Rosalia, who describes the history of *Eroda* and all of its oddities that make the island what it is. It tells the story of Styles' character, 'The Boy,' who despite the apparent peculiarities of the island, is outcasted due to his bright smile. Through the islanders' actions, The Boy reaches a point where his loneliness consumes him, and he contemplates ending his life. However, before he does so he befriends a fish. The Boy sees his own life in the fish and decides that if he dies the fish will too (Battoclette, 2019). The video then tells the story of the friendship between the fish and The Boy, who through their differences find a common bond. Yet as time passes the fish grows and eventually bursts through the tank he was residing in. Due to the fish's enormous size, The Boy is unable to move him into the ocean on his own. His efforts draw the attention of the locals that previously ousted him and spark a change within the island. With the help of the islanders, The Boy is able to push the fish into the ocean where it finds fish who are like him. In a similar fashion, The Boy brings the island together and introduces a new era where all individuals are accepted regardless of their oddities. The video concludes with The Boy leaving the island with the newfound freedom gained through his friendship with the fish (Styles, 2019). At first glance, Styles' music video does not look like a typical transmedia narrative. However, when looking at the marketing campaign that led up to the video's release and the media that followed after it, the *Eroda* narrative represents a new outlook on transmedia that has developed within the world of music. Using the structural and contextual components of Harry Styles' *Adore You* music video, this paper will examine how modern-day music artists are using transmedia marketing

campaigns to further indulge their audience in the narratives of both their music and the videos that accompany them.

The mystery of Styles' *Eroda* became known in October 2019, when a website promoting the island arrived on the Internet (Baio, 2019). In November, its official *Twitter* account began sharing teasers about the local attractions of the island. However, *Twitter* was not the only social media platform used for this campaign. The lead-up to *Eroda* incorporated both *Instagram* and *Facebook*. These social media pages worked to drive the campaign forward as they consistently dropped clues and clips that hinted towards Styles' and the *Adore You* video. For example, fans noted on the *Visit Eroda Facebook* page that "people were going to visit *Eroda* on December 15th," which was the same day as the release of Styles' album (Gulla, 2019). Similarly, on the *Eroda* website, there were clues that linked the island to Styles' song titles including the food menu and the attractions such as "Golden Way," (Sony Music Entertainment, 2019). The mystery-eques of the campaign ensured the engagement of fans and created a feeling of anticipation for both the video and the album. Styles' marketing campaign shared a modernized version of transmedia that was both user and author-driven. Although the narrative of *Eroda* and its accompanying music video is based on Styles' own created storyline and the work of the *Columbia* marketing department, *Eroda*'s decoding was the result of fan participation. Without the work of the fans and their passion for Styles' music *Eroda* would not have manifested into what it came to be. Through the decoding of its cryptic messages on a multitude of interconnected digital platforms and the collaboration of fans, the *Adore You* video was successful in building a transmedia campaign for its audience. The reliance on audience reception and decoding ability demonstrated the poststructuralism narrative implemented into its

storyline. Yet the transmedia marketing campaign was also “akin to a digital scavenger hunt [that] facilitate[d] a sense of accomplishment upon...completion,” (Miller, 2022a).

Styles’ campaign pushed forward an interactive transmedia narrative, however, he was not the first artist to produce a marketing campaign of this stature. For example, Taylor Swift is known to create transmedia marketing campaigns in all of her projects that send fans on a multi-platform hunt for ‘easter eggs’ that provide clues for her future music (Shen, 2022). Yet the *Eroda* project, despite its differences from Swift, still provides a connected transmedia narrative that not only sticks to one encompassing storyline but also develops within its time. From Henry Jenkins’ technological determinist view, this narrative was based on technology that developed to allow it to do so (Miller, 2022a). In comparison to music videos of the 2010s, the *Eroda* narrative highlights how the impact of social media’s popularity has changed how artists present their music and connected videos. It is unclear how successful this campaign would have been without both technology’s development and its transmedia presentation.

In connection, Jenkins also described, how artists create compelling worldmaking environments that are bigger than themselves as “fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions,” (Jenkins, p.114). Through *Eroda*, Styles’ pushed forward a transmedia worldmaking concept that engaged his target audience of fans. His fanbase not only created speculations prior to the release of the video but also elaborated the narrative through the use of tweets. On *Eroda*’s website under the ‘testimonials’ tab, it features tweets from fans, who embraced the lore of *Eroda* and created clever messages that further elaborated the mystery (Sony Music Entertainment, 2019). Through this user interaction across platforms, fans were able to further invest themselves in Styles’ music and develop a deeper connection to the narratives’ mystery and meanings.

2019 was not only an entry point into an era of dynamic narrative-based music videos and transmedia campaigns but it also provided a prelude to the multitude of social changes coming in 2020. The *Eroda* storyline shared different messages that all centred around the themes of loneliness, acceptance, and togetherness which were topics at the forefront of 2020. An indication of this is seen in the ousting of Styles' character due to his own oddity. The video's director, David Meyers, expressed that this reaction reflected how society "fear change or oddity, even when its best for them," (Palmieri, 2020). Similarly, the prelude shares how "loneliness is an ocean full of travellers trying to find their place in the world" and that if one is alone then they are "lost and left without hope," (Styles, 2019). The idea of loneliness contrasts the overall context of the narrative that depicts friendship. It potentially insinuates to the audience about the importance of relationships regarding how one needs others to feel hopeful and 'found' in the world. The message of togetherness is not a new concept to Styles' brand. He is often a role model of inclusivity and positivity as evident in his slogan "*Treat People with Kindness*," (Homewood, 2019). *Eroda* and its carnivalesque main character represent Styles' ideology and may also reflect the audience's view of self. Through his oddity and loneliness, Styles' character exemplifies audience empathy. The Boy is relatable and guides the audience to, as Jean-Louis Baudry describes, "feel as though the story's principal character is...a version of [themselves]," (Miller, 2022). Through this connection, the audience may further immerse themselves in the lore of *Eroda* and its characters.

From its conception, *Eroda* exemplified a new era of music video narratives that engage audiences on a multitude of platforms. Through the use of the *Eroda* mystery, Styles' created an interactive outlet for his fans to come together to decode the messages of the *Adore You* storyline. The music video highlights how modern-day music artists use transmedia marketing

campaigns to indulge their audience in their own creative, musical narratives. As technology becomes more advanced and the world shifts culturally and retrospectively, transmedia will move alongside it. The connection between technology development and music will thus determine the introduction of narratives to the future audiences and fan bases. From there on, only time will tell what their reception of these new narratives might be.

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