A Song of Ice and Fire as a Pedagogical Resource

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Abstract: *In this paper, from the analysis of the concepts from convergence culture, transmedia storytelling, interactivity and collaboration we aim to elaborate the content of discipline "Digital Media Lab II", that involves the concepts of convergence culture and transmedia storytelling, from the narrative of 'A Song of Ice and Fire'. Considering the success of the franchise and the fact of it being present in the daily life of the students, we intend to take the creative universe of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' as a pedagogical resource. The elements of the franchise, as the noble Houses of Westeros, the territories, among others will be used to introduce the concepts to students. At the same time they will be encourage to interact with the narrative and collaboratively, construct exercises of transmediation to getting a full understanding of the concepts.*

Keywords: Transmedia Storytelling; 'A song of ice and fire'; Methodology; Pedagogical resource

Introduction

It is undeniable that we are living at a time when information flow is becoming more and more intense. Such fact indicates a reflection not only of the potential demonstrated by Information and Communications Technology (ICT), especially enhanced with the advent of the internet, but also of the change in the communication paradigm. In this sense, the classic model of communication, which used to require a producer/transmitter, a consumer/receiver and an information flow which went a single way – transmitter-receiver, has reconfigured into a process of message dissemination whose flow moves both ways. In this context rise the *prosumers*, a term used by Alvin Toffler in his book *The Third Wave* (1980) to refer to the characters that result from the "union" of the roles of producers and receivers.

Nevertheless, in order to understand how the use of the mentioned term has become relevant within the current communicational process, it is necessary to look into the scenario in which the information flow has been taking place, and when we do that, a great deal of our attention turns to the world wide web. Since the creation of the first browser in 1991 (by Tim Beners-Lee), and of the first blog in 1993 (by Justin Hall), the internet had already demonstrated its main purpose: to connect. The web represented a breakthrough in communications, "a means that would become whatever we'd like it to be: one to one, one to many or many to many" (Gillmor, 2005, p.31-32)[1]. In fact, its role has evolved from a technological tool to an important element from a cultural point of view. Discussing this perspective, Pierre Lévy (2010) employs two terms: cyberspace and cyberculture. The former defines the Web as a space where people from all over the world get connected through computers, whereas latter refers to the "[...] set of (material and intellectual) techniques, practices, attitudes, ways of thinking and values that develop together with the growth of cyberspace." (Lévy, 2010, p.17)[2]

[1] Own translation.
[2] Own translation.

In this manner, the World Wide Web is getting more and more constant in the daily lives of people everywhere in the world. It has become part of the routine of millions of people around the globe. It has enabled us to go shopping, do scientific research, watch movies, play games or simply chat with friends, all online. For this reason, it is easily noticeable that it has become relevant in a variety of fields such as economy, entertainment, politics, education and communication. Under the perspective of communication we have clearly been witnessing what Marshall McLuhan called "global village" in 1964. In other words, an interconnected world, where the electronic means of mass communication take a crucial role in the process of integration. That is why nowadays it is almost impossible to define all possible kinds of interaction enabled by the internet.

The analysis and understanding of the presented conjecture, in which the "global village" (McLuhan, 1964) is a reality and cyberspace and cyberculture are part of the daily lives of millions of people around the world, lead us to another fundamental concept to understand the process of content production and transmission in the present day. Furthermore, such analysis enlightens the understanding of who the prosumers are and what their role is in the present context. What is being dealt here is a "culture of convergence" (Jenkins, 2008), which aims to depict and understand the current context in which individuals are producing and consuming information from three presumptions: the convergence of means of communication, collective intelligence and participative culture. This triad makes for a thorough comprehension of the concept of participative culture proposed by Jenkins (2008).

The first presumption effectively refers to the technological sphere of convergence. To Santaella (2004), the convergence of mediums may be understood as the "[…] union of several technological sectors and several devices which used to be individual and have now been merged into a single device, the computer […]."[3] *Smartphones*, for instance, are a very common example to illustrate what Santaella (2004) states. They enable us to have, at our disposal and in a single device, functions such as: telephone services, internet access, alarm clock, calculator, diary, calendar, camera and music player, to name a few. However, it is important to highlight that the technological dimension of convergence is only a part of the convergence culture. It is a relevant part, as it has allowed changes in the way consumption and production of content take place – it has become faster, easier and mobile.

As for the second one, we have collective intelligence, a term that Jenkins (2008) borrowed from Pierre Lévy. It synthetizes the capacity that the groups gathered in the cyberspace have to incorporate and enhance knowledge, thereby improving the level of specialization and understanding about a given theme. This process is consolidated through debates and the collaboration of all members. In this respect, collective intelligence, according to Pierre Lévy (2007), refers to the exchange of information and experiences among people, where knowledge connects with experience and intelligence. This knowledge is therefore deemed as a product of the interaction among individuals and groups with a common interest.

At last, the third presumption, participative culture, is defined by Jenkins (2008, p. 378) as "a culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the

[3] Own translation.

creation and circulation of new content."[4] Regarding such concept, Mazetti (2009) reminds that participative culture does not mean to equalize the power of producers and consumers. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that the latter now plays an active role and with freedom to collaborate in the construction of media products, as long as this freedom is in accordance with the objectives of the owners of the original stories. Under this perspective, it is important to observe that, although such condition seems to limit participation and collaboration, it has been noticed that face to face with the present consumers and their ability to judge, reject and produce content, media producers have been searching for alternatives of interaction with their audience so that they may be indeed "touched" by the story/message. Encouragement to participation and collaboration has therefore been taken into account as a strategy.

In this regard, considering the aspects involved in the three presumptions above, the culture of convergence presents itself as a set of transformations in many levels as it encompasses technology, information, consumers, corporations and society as a whole. Jenkins (2008) states that this convergence is attributed to

> […] the flow of content through multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about. (Jenkins, 2008, p. 2-3)

That being said, it is evident that the technological advances exert a strong influence on society's daily lives. Means of communication are increasingly becoming more essential cultural tools, and connectivity offers new ways of communicating, teaching and learning. Strategies of content distribution and contemporary languages get individuals in touch with media contents distributed in several platforms and invite them to participate and collaborate with them. Consequently, the scenario where *prosumers* began to act starts to consolidate. They play a role which is not limited to consumption. In fact, they take part in participative culture and collective intelligence. Anchored on convergence, they share, collaborate and interact with content, thus becoming, to a certain extent, both transmitter and producer.

Having in mind the process of content and information production within the convergence spectrum, another aspect starts to demonstrate relevance. Taking into account that all of us have at least one type of media preference – whether it is cinema, literature or television, what would happen if this media received a continuation in another platform? Would you follow it? What if the most intimate past of your favorite character were narrated through another media and at the same time the story's end moved to a different platform? Would it be at least interesting? This is an example of convergence and it nicely illustrates a concept that finds a fertile terrain to develop in the transmedia storytelling environment, a resource that has increasingly been considered as a way to seduce individuals and sell products.

1. Transmedia Storytelling

Geek, gamer, otaku, or simply "fan" are some of the adjectives used to identify followers of a certain kind of media. They may be consumers and collectors, who are able to devour a book in a single night, or spend hours in front of a computer screen to conclude all

[4] Own translation.

the missions in a game. They are individuals of all ages, social classes and gender who attribute a sentimental value to a trademark, character or media – common people of the contemporary world. The combination of such profile and the multimedia environment we live in constitutes a fruitful scenario for the transmedia storytelling e, a flexible narrative that presents itself in varied platforms and expands its universe for each new media it appears in.

In the early 90s, Marsha Kinder used the term "transmedia intertextuality" to describe works where characters would "appear" in multiple media platforms. Still, in 2009, in his book Convergence Culture, media theorist Henry Jenkins reformulated Kinder's term with the objective of describing "strongly integrated narratives"[5] (Philips, 2012, p.14). In Jenkins (2008) words,

> Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes whit each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that a richer entertainment experience. (Jenkins, 2008, p. 21)

Considering Jenkins' concept (2009a), it is relevant to bring hypertextuality to light among one of the most noticeable interactive processes in the transmedia storytellings. On the other hand, the biggest source of transmediation is in intertextuality, which, according to Bakhtin, (1986) is the dialogue among countless texts. That means that transmedia storytelling is a universe created through several kinds of media, and therefore expands individuals' knowledge concerning the content of a given work and enables them to try on new fictional experiences. It can be said that this is how media franchises emerge. These are the extension of all fictional content related to a trademark. In this regard, Giovagnoli (2011) believes that, when properly performed, a story's power grows to the point of attracting new fans and expanding the narrative.

According to Giovagnoli (2011), when shared, a story carries in itself narrative elements which work as amplifiers of meaning in the many media of the communicative system. It is like some kind of energy which is distributed, mixed and, depending on the presence of certain ingredients, may explode at any moment. "I call this the Nuclear Power of the Story: a strength able to contain the whole energy of matter in its core and release it, if not con-trolled, as emotions and the magic of the imagination in our lives" (Giovagnoli, 2011, p. 59). From there, it is possible to perceive the process of superposition and the complementarity of the many facets of information, something that a single receiver acquires as he moves from one type of media to another: from listener to spectator, from spectator to reader. In other words, this takes place while he gradually form his opinion about reality from multiple sources. (Santaella, 1996)

In this respect, considering the construction of transmedia storytelling, Carlos A. Scolari (2013, p. 45) accents the importance of planning in the process of creation. According to him, producers/writers must have transmedia in mind from the very first moment in which a narrative universe is created, in addition he emphasizes two coordinates to define transmedia storytelling: "1) expansion of the story through several medias, and 2) users collaboration in such process of expansion". Moreover, the task of producing for individuals who are not satisfied with a single type of content is not only relevant but also a motivating factor throughout the process of development of a transmedia storytelling. It may be said that,

[5] Own translation.

with the increase of the amount of content offered on the internet, the audience has been searching for information and entertainment in more than one platform (sometimes even simultaneously), and the strategy of transmedia storytelling has been catering for that.

In this scenario, it is worth noting that both hypertext and hypermedia stand out as interactive processes that enable the personal choice of different paths for having new experiences. These are liquid, fluid, participative and autonomous environments. Corroborating Santaella's (1996) and Bauman's (2003) perspectives, such environments allow for a reading without beginning, middle or end, offering the possibility of "looking at" the content through distinct means. From this point, hypertextual narrative is defined as a free reading mode in which the user decides how to do. Therefore, thinking about the multiple possibilities of going through content and looking to sustain the individual's autonomy to choose, when a transmedia storytelling is built, it is paramount to be aware of the seven principles proposed by Jenkins (2009a). To him, such principles are crucial for a narrative disseminated by different means to be considered transmedia storytelling. They are: *spreadability vs. drillability, continuity vs. multiplicity, immersion vs. extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity and performance.*

As for spreadability vs. drillability, Jenkins (2009a) affirms that the former refers to the capacity a story has to engage the audience, making the narrative to be expanded by them thus increasing the economic and cultural capitals of the project. The latter regards the study of different audiences who may consume the narrative, which aims at finding the one that has the best characteristics for this engagement to take place. Continuity in turn brings along the need for the narrative universe to possess common elements in the different ways the media involved unravels a project. That is why a character or event which is present in more than one type of media needs to have their characteristics finely defined and equal in these different platforms so that the audience may identify the coherence and respect to the original narrative (the main narrative, which originates the developments and the other narratives).

On the other hand, according to Jenkins (2009a), in spite of the need for keeping the fundamental basis of the original story, multiplicity will approach the uncountable existing resources so as to build more elaborate developments and relatively distant from the original narrative, such as transporting characters to other scenarios or ages. As for immersion, it refers to the construction of a narrative which allows the user to become part of its content, that is, it enables the audience to feel active in the story. Intimately linked to immersion is extractability. It makes possible for narrative elements to be transported to people's daily lives, as in the creation of licensed products (which do not constitute or expand the narrative, but in fact reinforce it and make it more present in the consumer's daily life).

In relation to wordbuilding, Jenkins (2009b) points out that it is intimately connected to the concepts of immersion and extractability as it makes use of an array of elements. These include, for instance, the wardrobe and vocabulary of the characters that compose a story in order to transform this set into something unique, something that identifies the universe in question and makes it different from other stories and universes. Seriality in its turn is defined as the resulting hypertextual network of the main narrative and the narratives that unfold from it. Therefore seriality opposes to the linearity of the projects which involve a single kind of media and of narrative.

The penultimate principle proposed by Jenkins (2009b) is subjectivity. The multiple points of view, concepts and characters involved result in innumerable possibilities of transmedia extensions. For the author, these extensions have three basic functions within the

project: exploring dimensions of the original fictional world which haven't been dealt with in sufficient depth, extending the timeline of the narrative universe and showing the stories of secondary characters in the main narrative.

We finally get to the last of the seven principles: performance. It is related to the fans of the narrative universe, engaged consumers and considered by Jenkins (2009b) as vital to disseminate stories, defend them, participate in their constructions, and in cases of more extreme engagements, perpetuate the story that the project involves. The fans, or followers, are then chief pieces of in the process of popularization of a narrative. They are the ones responsible for the creation of blogs and Facebook and Google+ groups and pages. Such interaction continues and brings about what Jenkins (2008) calls “emotional capital” or “lovemarks”, in other words, media which have a strong relationship with their consumers.

Fans engage in a series of practical social activities surrounding the media franchise, going beyond the role of mere collectors of media products (CDs, videos, books etc.) and carrying on regular conversations with other individuals whose only common connection is the fact that they are fans (Thompson, 1995). In Thompson's “The Media and Modernity” (1995), he asserts that while fans are dependent on the available products, they transform and incorporate these products in a symbolic universe which is build and singly inhabited by their peers.

> Among the most dedicated fans, this transformative process can become extremely elaborate, resulting in the creation of whole new genres of books, videos, artwork, etc., which, while parasitic on the original media products, often move beyond them. (Thompson, 1995, p. 223)

Based on this presumption, the use of transmedia storytelling in the academic environment may be seen through the perspective that students, who are at the same time fans, have the potential to get a different kind of motivation to learn a wide range of subjects with this kind of collaborative construction of knowledge. In such process, the teacher has the job of guiding students in their first textual productions. Not as a proofreader, but as a critical reader of the content produced. Additionally, the teacher should foster debates and discussions and foster the creation of new narrative developments. As a result, students, as digitally immerse individuals, tend to feel attracted by the process of creation and consumption of digital stories (Alexander, 2011). Nalin Sharda (2009) says that the educational potential of working with transmedia storytelling lies in the possibility of merging pedagogical content and what is experienced by the students, such as collaborative work, information sharing and interaction.

2. The narrative of ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’

‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ is a series of epic fantasy books by writer George R. R. Martin that started being developed in 1991, and whose first volume was released in 1996. Nowadays the series has 5 published books and at least two more are expected to be released. In the construction of its narrative there are three main arguments that get increasingly weaved throughout the books: the chronicle of a power struggle for the Iron Throne involving many families and, later, for the control of the Seven Kingdoms; the rising threat of supernatural creatures known as Others, who live beyond an immense wall of ice in the North; and the ambition of Daenerys Targaryen, the exiled daughter of a king murdered thirteen years before, and who is about to return to her homeland and reclaim the iron throne which is hers by 'right'.

The books narrate the events in the Seven Kingdoms, where a war for the Iron Throne is fought. The story unfolds mostly in the continent of Westeros, but part of it also takes place in an extensive land in the East called Essos. The narrative constitutes a rich universe which goes beyond not only the borders of a geographic area but also the definition of specific cultural elements in each territory, the creation of dialects and even an extinct language.

In order to understand the narrative, the first step is to understand how the continent of Westeros has been unified. In the past, seven independent kingdoms have been taken, one by one, and later unified by Aegon, the Conqueror and his sisters/wives Rhaenya and Visenya. The three of them belonged to House Targaryen, which was united with the dragons. After the Kingdoms have been conquered, Aegon used his enemies' swords to build the “Iron Throne”. House Targaryen unstoppably ruled Westeros for almost three centuries, until a rebellion put an end to its hegemony. In this process, King Aerys II, known as the “Mad King” was murdered by Sir Jaime Lannister, member of the royal guard, and Robert Baratheon took the Throne, declaring himself king.

In this fashion, the novels which start a bit more than thirteen years after this event will dedicate to unravel the three main plots presented above. As for the first plot, it is about the conspiracy and war for the throne. Set in the Seven Kingdoms, it narrates the struggle between rival couples after King Robert's death. The throne is claimed by his heir, Joffrey, who is supported by the influential family of his mother, the Lannisters. However, Lord Eddard Stark, childhood friend and main advisor of Robert, finds out that Joffrey and his other two brothers are illegitimate sons of the king and that the throne belongs, by right, to Robert's middle brother Stannis Baratheon. So as to protect his secret and his brother, who was responsible for the king's death, the queen orders the prison and execution of Stark, accusing him of having murdered Robert. Furthermore, Renly, Stannis Baratheon's youngest brother, with the support of House Tyrell, also reclaims the crown, ignoring the order of succession. While the battle of the claimers for the Iron Throne advances, Robb Stark, Lord Eddard's heir, is proclaimed king of the North with the support of his vassals and of the Tullys, where his mother Catelyn resided.

The second plot brings in its center creatures known as Other, who live beyond the ice wall in the north of the Seven Kingdoms. The over-700-feet-high construction is guarded by members of the Night's Watch, a group who permanently keeps Westeros under surveillance to defend it from the Others, an enemy considered to be extinct for a long time, and from the wildings. Nonetheless, after the Rangers have been murdered beyond the wall, suspicions that the Others had returned reappeared. Little has been approached about this mystery throughout the five released so far, therefore this part of the plot is still keeping readers and fans in suspense.

The third and last plot follows brothers Viserys and Daenerys, the only living descendants of the Targaryen Dynasty, who have been exiled beyond the Narrow Sea. There, Viserys marries his youngest sister, Daenerys, and Khal Drogo, military leader of thousands of nomad warriors called dothraki. Viserys' goal is to use his sister's marriage as leverage to start his own army and reclaim the Iron Throne. However, after a series of events, Viserys is murdered by Drogo, who also dies afterwards. As a result of Khal Drogo's death, his army dissolves and less than a hundred of people continue following Daenerys. But the following event changes that fact. Keeping the tradition of her husband's people, Daenerys erects a funeral pyre and places there all the good she had received when they got married. Among these are three dragon eggs, an extinct creature. In a kind of trance, the last Targaryen enters

the flames, but to everyone's surprise she comes out unharmed and carrying three small dragons. From that moment, the Dothraki who were present little by little pledged faithfulness to her and she begins her journey to reclaim the Iron Throne.

Going beyond the narrative universe of books, it is worth highlighting that *A song of ice and fire* has overflown in the printed pages and earned a television series produced and broadcasted by HBO, which will start its fourth season. Also, it has earned two novels (a third one also about to be launched), and also a few games, including an RPG.

3. Educational Possibilities

As stated by Pierre Lévy (1995),

> [...] knowledge is no longer a static pyramid, it grows and travels in a wide mobile network of laboratories, research centers, libraries, databanks, men, technical procedures, medias, measuring and recording devices, a network that extends between humans and non-humans, associating molecules and social groups, electrons and institutions. (Lévy, 1995, p. 179)[6]

According to Siemens (2004, as cited in Renó; Versuti; Renó, 2012, p. 59), these characteristics conform to the principles of connectivism. Moreover, it is necessary to promote and maintain connections to facilitate continuous learning. This represents a new way of learning and teaching, as learning and the construction of knowledge are based on the diversity of opinions and on the accomplishment of multiple tasks simultaneously. Learning increasingly includes the action of connecting different sources of information since social media foster creativity and the sharing of ideas. Consequently, all that demands continuous learning and the creation of learning communities (blogs, microblogs, podcasts, wikis, SMS, virtual worlds, social networks, interactive videos, chats, interactive reflections, quizzes, articles, interactive e-books, forums).

In this sense, since narratives are contents that migrate through the convergence of interfaces and platforms, transmedia storytelling may also be products that derive from the connections created by the cyberspace (Lévy, 1999). It is with the interaction that arises from such process that the potential of newborn content as a learning tool, which is also empowered by connectivism, can be witnessed. That is how the use of transmedia storytelling as a pedagogical resource in the classroom collaborates for improving and expanding the pedagogical content so that it becomes more attractive to students. In this proposition, the teacher is someone who breaks the teaching hierarchy and plays the role of students' guide in their insatiable pursuit of knowledge. “Students learn following their own methods, through paths chosen by themselves” (Kohan, 2005, p. 4).[7]

Such thought dialogues with the principles of connectivism and with the possibilities of immersion in the transmedia storytelling, in which students will be able to choose the paths to follow in order to discover a content that is distributed in a non-linear way. Immerse in the narrative and stimulated to stay connected, these individuals may build their own sharing spaces of collaboratively produced content. Teachers then play the role of a conductor of the processes of creation of new stories that may be built through media franchises. In this light, the buildup of knowledge takes place with exercises of transmediation, which consist in, after selecting an aspect, element or part of an existing narrative from an already-built franchise,

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[6] Own translation.
[7] Own translation.

propose that students create new developments as means to approach a given concept. That is, a didactic component of the school subject shall serve as a fundamental piece of this new story which is narrated simultaneously to its construction from an existing narrative universe.

That being said, for the discipline of Laboratório em Mídia Digital II (Digital Media Lab II), whose content the culture of convergence and the transmedia storytelling, what the present work proposes is that from the narrative universe of *A song of ice and fire*, some core concepts of the discipline syllabus should be worked with students. In such proposal, instead of having content exclusively presented by the teacher, students should do research, find a diversity of sources and, in a practical manner develop their understandings around these concepts inside a narrative that unravels the universe of *A song of ice and fire*. It is still worth emphasizing that *A song of ice and fire* has been chosen here due to its great acceptance by the young audience, group which the students of the aforementioned discipline belong to. In addition, among these students many have been identified as fans of George R. R. Martin's story.

In practical terms, two elements of the narrative will be used to address four key concepts of the discipline. The first element are the maps of the narrative. They are an important part of the narrative and each book brings along a part that portrays a territory used in the story. The reason for the choice of these maps was its importance for the comprehension of the geographic space of the narrative, as the continent of Westeros is divided by the dispute for the Iron Throne, as well as for the comprehension of the change of location of characters throughout the narrative. Maps make for a better understanding of the story itself, by using them, students may execute a mediation exercise, creating a narrative development in which the concepts of collective intelligence and participative culture are dealt with. The choice of addressing two subjects from one element happened owing to the several possibilities that maps present for each of their territories and for the characters that move around them, and also because collective intelligence and participative culture are both parts of the same process: convergence culture.

The second element is the character Daenerys Targaryen, the last descendent of House Targaryen. She possesses a great connection with the dragons. Daenerys follows a course where she goes from deportee to queen and “mother” of three dragons, the last ones that have been heard of. When she enters the pyre that cremates her husband's dead body carrying three fossilized dragon eggs, they hatch. This is a pivotal moment in the story, for this is when character's transformation comes about and it is clear to all that Daenerys has, indeed, “dragon's blood”. From that moment, she begins a journey back to Westeros to reclaim the Iron Throne that used to belong to her family for a long period and that was taken after her father Aerys II was murdered. Daenerys also seeks revenge for the hunting and killing of her family during the rebellion to seize the throne.

Considering that the Daenery's story is still in progress, and that it is of great relevance to the whole story as she is a great threat to the other houses that dispute the Iron Throne, especially for having the dragons on her side, it is suggested that students create a development for the character's narrative. The concepts to be dealt with are interaction and collaboration. They are vital for the discipline as they characterize behavior patterns that are crucial for the development of the transmedia storytelling. Therefore, from the Daenerys Targaryen's already built trajectory, students should develop their own narratives about the character, bringing along with their stories the aforesaid concepts.

In this way, we are looking into the development of a teaching-learning process that stimulates students, thereby leading them to collaborate in the construction of concepts, encouraging research and the autonomy in each one of the participants of the pedagogical process of knowledge construction. Furthermore, we expect, by the intelligent use of transmedia storytelling and transmediation exercises in favor of education, to stimulate students' creative capacity, as well as collaborative learning, better absorption of the content at study and even build a rewarding interdisciplinary relationship.

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