In-Between Worlds: A Complex Transmedia Universe about Myths, Creatures and Traditions

Adelina-Laura BULIBAȘA¹

Abstract: The In-Between Worlds Transmedia Universe started out as a blank whiteboard. Sixteen students, three coordinators and multiple contributors and collaborators created this Universe together, during one full semester (from October 2022 until February 2023). The project culminated with an exhibition that lasted one week, with the opening on 11 February in the Ethnographical Museum of Transylvania located in the heart of Cluj-Napoca city, Romania. The project revolves around the subject of mythological creatures, myths and traditions from the territory of Romania. The exhibition was meant to showcase the ephemeral parts of this project, such as: several interactive installations, projections, photography exhibition, Virtual Reality experience, but also the more permanent parts of the project, such as: the feature documentary and the card game. It is important to understand what exactly means the domain of the Transmedia, what are the elements and components that build a Transmedia Universe and how exactly this project encompasses each one of those, in order to achieve a complex and complete structure, and to also understand the reasoning behind each artistic product.

Keywords: transmedia, storytelling, myths, creatures, exhibition.

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What is Transmedia?

Usually, when I definite it in class, in front of my students, I describe transmedia with the help of a simple definition where I state that transmedia represents the process where a story, a subject or a theme gets dispersed across multiple delivery channels, with the purpose of creating a unique entertainment *experience that is unified and coordinated.*² A more visual definition would have you imagine a puzzle formed from three, four or more pieces - when experimenting a transmedia universe, each piece of this puzzle represents a different medium in which part of a certain story is told: you can experiment only one piece of this puzzle and the story will still make sense (for example, a movie about Batman), or you can search for the rest of the pieces and use your own knowledge to put together the whole puzzle (the comic books about Batman, the games about Batman, the animated series and so on). When succeeding in putting together all the pieces and creating the whole image of the story, having all the information that was initially scattered throughout multiple delivery channels, you actually experiment a Transmedia Universe as a whole.

The concept is represented by a compound word, consisting from the Latin prefix *trans*,³ which means on or to the other side of, across, beyond and the common noun *media*,⁴ which is represented by the main means of mass communication, like the internet, publishing or broadcasting, regarded in a collective manner. Merged together, the prefix and the noun – transmedia – can be viewed as a way of transcending the known platforms, in order to bring something more to a certain message that is trying to be disseminated.

To conclude this brief explanation, in my eyes transmedia represents a form of artistic expression mixed with the complex technique of giving life to a comprehensive and integrated *universe* that does not end when the screen turns black or the audience leaves the building – the tackled subjects have now the chance to become fluent, with no defined beginning or sudden end, and with the purpose of giving the audience a chance to participate

² Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," *Pop Junctions*, March 21, 2007 http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trans.

⁴ Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/media.

actively, to create something inside this *universe*, to try keeping alive the characters, to re-experiment it whenever they feel like, to interact freely with the artwork, to become co-authors, to use their knowledge and imagination in order to put together the different pieces of the story.

What is a Transmedia Universe?

The concept of Transmedia Universe is found in Aino-Kaisa Koistinen's, Raine Koskimaa's and Tanja Valisalo's book *Constructing a Transmedia Universe: The Case of Battlestar Galactica*, where it is explained as being "not limited to the narrative worlds and diegetic contents, but encompasses the production and marketing issues, as well as the consumption."⁵ So, in a Transmedia Universe the focus should not only be on a sole product, but the whole process should be in the focus, from shaping the idea, creating it, disseminating it, advertising it, until it reaches the audience, and either archiving it or in an ideal case, perpetuating it for as long as possible. Most of the *transmedia products* are usually meant to be more than just a one-time meeting with the audience – they were meant to continuously live with the help of the audience, with the implication of the communities based on co-authorship, sharing and also *consuming* the products more than once, in different ways, finding different parts of the story.

One of my colleagues specialized in Transmedia, PhD Ioana Mischie, likes to compare a Transmedia Universe with a successful Tetris game, with a Russian Doll or even with a family tree.⁶ All these comparisons do make sense when you spread a Transmedia Universe and its elements into a visual map, but as I mentioned earlier, my favorite visual comparison is a puzzle game. This way, the player (meaning the audience) can choose in which order

⁵ Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Raine Koskimaa and Tanja Välisalo, *Constructing a Transmedia Universe: The Case of Battlestar Galactica*, 2021, preprint version, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356987182_Constructing_a_Transmedia_Universe_ The_Case_of_Battlestar_Galactica.

⁶ Concepts from Ioana-Maria Baican-Mischie, "Impactul Transmedia asupra cinematografului: O nouă avangardă imersivă conteporană" (PhD diss., Universitate Națională de Artă Teatrală și Cinematografică "I. L Caragiale", 2019).

should the puzzle pieces come together, in what way and especially, how much time they want to dedicate building this puzzle. Also, they can create their own pieces which they can later bring into this already shaped Universe.

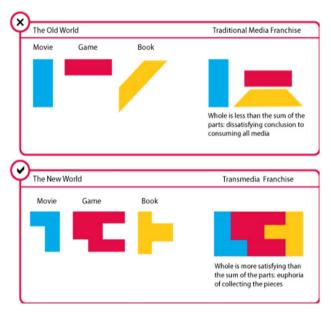


Fig 1: Illustration on how Transmedia works compared to Traditional Media⁷

Because shaping a Transmedia Universe is not a game of guessing, but rather a process in which there are essential elements and fundamental components that need to be part of the finished product in order to for this product be considered a Transmedia Universe, I will briefly mention these elements and principles.

There are four essential elements in a Transmedia project, as follows: *Multi-Dimensionality* of the project/work and of its exploration methods; *Trans-Disciplinarity* – merging art with technology or/and science; *Pluri-Perspectivism* regarding a certain subject; *Long-Term Configuration* of the project. And there are four more fundamental components of a Transmedia Universe:

⁷ Robert Pratten, Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling. A Practical Guide for Beginners (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 3.

The Infinite Narrative Paradigm (infinite conceptual structure); *Homo Immersionis* (immersive spectatorial structure); *Auctorial Network* (collaborative auctorial structure); *Interface* (the Transmedia bridge between all the semiotic categories, or in a more simple manner, the connection between the artistic concept and the technological way of displaying it).

The Infinite Narrative Paradigm, which has the purpose of transforming a seemingly normal and common subject into a complex transmedia universe can be implemented through simple methods such as: changing the classical, linear narrative structure (beginning-middle-end) format to one that can be experimented in multiple ways without a rigid form; letting the audience or a minority share their own point of view, in order to access pluri-perspectivism, rather than have a unique point of view which usually belongs to the author or to a majority; creating a form of equilibrium inside the story with the purpose of replacing conflict with harmony; creating multiple levels of understanding the project, based on the context in which they are experienced, on the audience and other factors, in order to switch the general attitude towards the project from an attitude based on fast results and answers to an attitude that is centered around dialogue, questions, multiple perspectives and evolution process and in order to achieve an extended impact, one that is spread on social, artistic and educational domains; acquiring the multi-dimensionality element by combining multiple universes or different characters from different dimensions/worlds/ universes, thus acquiring multiple dimensions to one project rather than having a singular one.

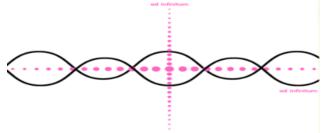


Fig 2: Illustrative depiction of The Infinite Narrative Paradigm⁸

⁸ Ioana-Maria Baican-Mischie, "Impactul Transmedia asupra cinematografului: O nouă avangardă imersivă contemporană" (PhD diss., Universitate Națională de Artă Teatrală și Cinematografică "I. L. Caragiale", 2019), 129.

The second fundamental component, Homo Immersionis, is referring to the immersive spectatorial structure of a transmedia universe. This *Homo Immersionis*, represented by the neo-spectator, can be seen as the individual that is not only watching a story, passively, waiting for it to end, but the spectator that is actually present in the story, choosing different angles every time, addressing questions every time, deciding to be part of the artwork. With the development of different technologies, the classical spectatorship typology, in which the artwork was placed in the center while the public was marginally idolizing it, became redundant and now, the spectators are surrounded by the artwork, being sunken into it, learning how to explore it, navigate it and optimize it to their own liking. Both the contemporary cinematographic world and the new immersive technologies that dominate the artistic world – extended realities, augmented reality, virtual reality, and mediated reality – are based on immersivity and are helping this new paradigm of spectatorship to become the new norm.

The Auctorial Network is a concept that encourages the existence of multiple individuals contributing to the same project, that can identify their roles as initiators, continuators or evaluators, but in the end they will all be regarded equally, as creators. A transmedia universe encourages the existence of multiple authors, of collaborating creators and of co-creationism, because the whole purpose of creating such a complex world is not only to generate an artwork, but to also optimize it, archive it, document it and, if possible, perpetuate it.

The In-Between Worlds Transmedia Universe

The main course I am teaching in the Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Theatre and Film, Cinematography and Media Department, is called Creative Transmedia Project. Each year, during one full semester, the master programs Documentary Filmmaking and Digital Interactive Arts second year's students are collaborating together, trying to conceive a Transmedia Universe. This year was even more special because a total of four Erasmus students joined our course: two girls from Spain, one girl from Italy and one

girl from Germany, all with different backgrounds. After learning the basics of what Transmedia is, the categories of Transmedia projects, the essential elements and fundamental components of a Transmedia Universe and the methods in which these can be implemented, they go on with the practical approach of building such Universe. This year, after we got to know each other, after we watched and experienced some other relevant examples in the field, we went on with the pre-production and the production per se. Keeping in mind that we had very limited time at our disposal, we set our deadlines and proceeded to find a theme of common interest among the students in which they can all be involved. The main goal is not to create a perfect project, but rather to bring together two very different programs together, to guide everyone towards using their own set of skills as best as they can, to understand and apply new paradigms regarding storytelling, spectatorship, authorship and to experiment as much as they can with the new technology and the innovative ways of approaching a certain subject.

I was pretty surprised to find out that the subject my students want to approach is 'mythological creatures' and the myths around them. We knew we had to heavily research this topic, so we started doing so, not limiting ourselves to a certain geographical territory, because we would have liked to create a map of the whole world and to insert the most interesting creatures and to try and identify connections in the myths from different countries and continents. Unfortunately, we soon realized that this work would take several years and we only have a couple of months to finish this project, so we decided to concentrate only on mythological creatures and the myths around them from the Romanian territory.

After meeting with a few specialists in the subject, we decided on a few possible products we want to include in our Universe: a feature-length documentary movie, a card game created by us, several interactive installations to exhibit at the opening day, a photography exhibition that would be created with the help of the community and a website, displaying information about the team, the project and a part of our research on the mythical creatures, synthesized.

The Documentary Filmmaking students, coordinated by their most experienced colleague, Horațiu Curuțiu, proceeded with the production of the feature documentary. They took two different field trips in the Petroșani area, in the south-west part of Romania and met with different people that were very involved within the myths and stories that were surrounding that certain area. They started recording interviews with different people: specialists in the domain, such as Associate Professor Claudiu Turcuş, Professor Ioan Pop-Curşeu, the director of the ethnographical museum from Cluj-Napoca, geography teacher and director of the tourist information center from Uricani; common people from the Petroşani area, common people from Transylvania, the founder of tinutulmomarlanilor.ro and so on.

In the meantime, some of the Digital Interactive Arts students were preparing the card game, trying to set up the gameplay, the style, the rules, and drawing the illustrations. It was not at all an easy task, creating a card game from scratch, but what helped was reducing the number of the mythological creatures we want to include in this game and based on that number, which was around 20 creatures, we made some groups of creatures - the "love group", the "blessing group", the "evil group" and the "trickster group". In these groups, we included creatures such as: strigoi, moroi, Zburătorul, pricolici, solomonari, Sf. Duminică, ielele and so on, while also trying to avoid the stereotypical creatures such as Count Dracula. These groups helped give the whole project a different structure because we also focused our research on these specific groups and creatures. After many failed attempts to create a game totally from scratch, we decided to adapt the Mafia card game (also known as Werewolf), combined with the rules of the online game Town of *Salem* and based on these two, we succeeded in finally creating our product: In-Between Worlds – The Card Game.

While working on the project, we were lucky enough to have Associate Professor Horea Avram join us, my colleague teaching Visual Storytelling for Digital Media, by agreeing that the practical works that a few of the students from Digital Interactive Arts are preparing for his course, to have the same theme as our project and to be presented in the same time and at the same place as our opening. Basically, we agreed on integrating these works into our Transmedia Universe, thus gaining three more products:

• *Dragons, Giants, Citadels* – an audio-visual installation that explores Romanian mythology regarding dragons, giants and the citadels they've built, as well as some explanations extracted from the folklore, regarding the geomorphology of the Apuseni Mountains (West Carpathian Mountains in Romania). The installation uses raw drone footage of different locations from the Apuseni Mountains, footage which has been compiled through an Artificial Intelligence (AI) filter named deepdream.com and afterwards processed through the EBSynth application. The soundscape features a sample from Ioan Pop-Curșeu, expert in cultural anthropology. This installation was created by Toma Bărbulescu, master student at Digital Interactive Arts program.

• *Fragmentation* is an audio-video installation that uses spatial depth and irregular frame ratios as an artistic means to influence visual perception. The installation consists of a video montage of scenes from various films and footage woven together in a seamless and fragmented manner. The found footage technique gives the film a raw, intimate, and personal feel, as if the footage has been pieced together from various sources and is being shown to the viewer for the first time.

The project serves to explore the story of "strigoi" and their mythological archetype. It serves as a meditation on the transience of life and encourages the viewer to contemplate the nature of existence by juxtaposing these ideas with the classic "strigoi" story. This installation was created by Lucia Codreanu, master student at Digital Interactive Arts program.

 Mythological Homage is a Virtual Reality (VR) installation about the mythological belief about the soul travelling towards the World Tree, transposed under the Digital Storytelling umbrella. Inside this installation, the audience will find themselves in the middle of a mythological story, where they are invited to explore the immersive space by embodying a soul placed in the in-between worlds, which roams its own life experiences towards the final meeting with the "Pasărea-Măiastră".

A mythological homage is a representation or a reproduction of some characters, legends or myths from different ancient cultures. This type of homage can be consisted from a story, a painting, a sculpture, a musical piece or any other form of art. Also, it can be used as a way of bringing back into the public attention certain characters or myths that were lost into forgetfulness. This Virtual Reality experience was created by Adrian-Florin Marc, master student at Digital Interactive Arts program.

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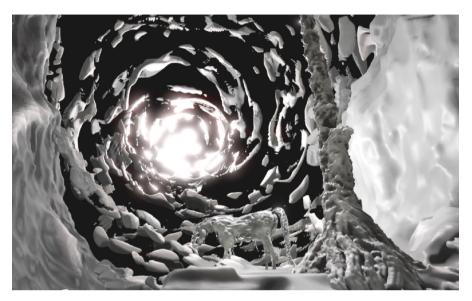


Fig 3: Image from the Virtual Reality installation *Mythological Hommage* by Florin-Adrian Marc

The students also prepared a fourth installation, that was not part of the course Visual Storytelling for Digital Media, but it was a collective effort between the Digital Interactive Arts students. The installation was called In-Between Worlds: Skies and it was meant to conceptually explore the mythological motive of the "overlapping skies" and the fantastic beings that are inhabiting them. The graphics of the animation was generated by Artificial Intelligence using the website deepdreamgenerator.com. The technical part of this installation was rather a simple one, using a projector, a speaker, a laptop and a Microsoft Kinect, and the public could interact with the piece by moving left or right. When the audience performed some movements, the animation from the projection would also move, revealing some of the conceptualized "overlapping skies", which refers to the Seven Heavens, a concept that appears in religious or mythological cosmology, referring to seven levels or divisions of the Heavens - it is found in the ancient Mesopotamian religion but also in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and even in some other religions such as Hinduism. The students visually conceptualized the beliefs around the Seven Heavens and turned it into an interactive installation.

All these four installations were well integrated into the whole exhibition, scattered through other products such as the feature documentary, the card game or the photography exhibition. The public's journey started with a welcoming area, where they could hang out, drink some beverages and experiment the card game - we had two tables prepared for the audience who wished to give it a try and play the game – then they would descend and interact with the interactive installation In-Between Worlds: Skies. After that, they would find themselves in a big room where the photography exhibition was displayed and also the audio-visual installation Dragons, Giants, Citadels. From the big room they could take on two different paths: either enter a smaller room which contained the Fragmentation installation, either descend further into an even bigger room, where chairs and a big projection screen would wait for the public who wanted to attend the live screening of the feature documentary. In the last room of the exhibition space we prepared the most immersive experience of the whole event, the Virtual Reality installation Mythological Homage, where only one participant could enter the experience at a time, but the whole journey was broadcasted on a screen for the rest of the audience.

The interactive installations were meant to be the ephemeral part of this project, while the card game, the feature documentary and the website were meant to be the permanent elements of this Transmedia Universe. The photography exhibition falls somewhere in the middle of these two categories, because we could exhibit all the works in that particular environment in that special evening only once, but they can also be seen and admired online. For the photography exhibition we prepared an open call, with the purpose of including the community in our project, to have them contribute with their own ideas, artistic touch and knowledge upon the subject. We launched the call online, almost a month prior the exhibition, in a dedicated Facebook group called Fotocluj, which reunites more than five thousand members, either professional photographers or amateur ones from the city of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. We received more than one hundred submissions from which we finally chose 16, we printed them in high quality fine print and exhibited them in our opening space. All the submissions we received were very interesting, the majority of them respected the theme, but the final 16 that we chose were the most accurate representations of our general subject. One of the most curious facts about the final selections is that 15 out of the 16 images contain

a live subject – a person, either in the moving or in a static pose, most of them being shot in a very dramatic scenario, using make-up, costumes and sometimes even props or décor, trying to embody a mythical creature, or some of them, the idea of myth, dream, fairy, illusion, magic.



Fig 4: Poster of the In-Between Worlds: Myths, Creatures, Traditions exhibition

The final element prepared in this project is the most accessible and permanent product – the website. There was a lot of debate and preparation regarding the aspect and the functionality of the website, but we had to decide on the best formula based on the student's skills and also based on the little time left to prepare this product. What we knew from the beginning was that we had to integrate all the 12 characters inside the website. We haven't prepared only illustrations for the characters, but in the meantime we also researched each one of them and prepared a text where the public and the users of the website will find out about fundamental information about each character. The texts are not very long, the point of them is to synthetize the most important information about each mythical creature, they are both in English and Romanian and at the end of each text we included a few references in case the users want to read further about a certain character. Our own references in formulating the information about each mythical creatures were books (for example: Mitologie română by Romulus Vulcănescu or Mitologie română – Dicționar by Ion Ghinoiu), online articles, popular knowledge and part of the interviews we prepared for the feature documentary.



Fig 5: Three of the illustrated characters (Iele, Moroi and Strigoi)

When accessing the website, the users will find most of the relevant content and information on the main page – they are greeted with a very short excerpt of the feature documentary and with the question "What myth am I living?" and a short description about the project, under this, there is a button that can access the feature documentary. The documentary is subtitled in English and it lasts just under one hour. After this section, we have another

description about the teams that made this project come alive and about the products that are contained into this Universe. Underneath this, the next section depicts 3 of the installations described above: Mythological Tribute, Fragmentation and Dragons, Giants, Citadels – each one of them can be accessed through a button and the public can find out more about the installations, as well as images or videos related to the artistic concept. Scrolling further, the users will see the 12 illustrations depicted one by one, and also some buttons that can sort the characters into the main groups: Love, Blessing, Trick or Evil. Each group contains 3 characters: Love - Ielele, Sânzienele and Zburătorul; Blessing – Ursitoare, Pasăre Măiastră and Saint Sunday (Sfânta Duminică); Trick - Moroi, Joimărița and Solomonar; and finally, the Evil group - Strigoi, Pricolici and Samca. Each group have a different coloured background pink, yellow, purple or dark blue - that can help the user to identify the different groups more easier during the card game. As I mentioned earlier, when clicking each mythical character on the website, the public will access a page with information and references about the chosen character. At the end of the main page, there is information about how to pre-order the card game and finally, information about the date and place of the exhibition.

The website contains two more important pages – an About page with a description of the project and a Team page where all the students involved in the project can be found, with their own photo and their names, and myself, as a coordinator. The last page found in the website is a 'Contact' page that will lead the user to the Digital Interactive Arts' official Facebook page.

Conclusion

The *In-Between Worlds* is a complex project, and although some elements might need a little more attention (the website needs to be updated, the rules of the card game need to be revised), it is one of the most completed Transmedia Universes that I have experienced up until the present times. It is pretty unusual for such a project to have both digital and analogue elements, especially to prepare all this 'puzzle pieces' in a few months. Luckily, the students believed in this project, they worked extremely hard to finish all the products in time, and their passion shone bright through every little thing they have prepared.

We made sure, together, coordinators and disciples, that the public and the users will be attracted into this Universe and mesmerized by all the new knowledge they will gain and all the concepts that were merged together so well.

In my opinion, this project ticks all the essential elements and the fundamental components: we have *multiple dimensions* in our work thanks to the many platforms we were able to use and the many ways in which we depicted one subject; you can find *pluri-perspectivism* about the topic only by watching the feature documentary, in which multiple characters have completely different opinions about the same subject, but you can also find several different point of views about the topic also in the photography exhibition or even inside the interactive installations; the *trans-disciplinarity* element is checked by merging digital with analogue, art with technology, but also by bringing together so many different students' skills - we combined the skills of Digital Interactive Arts master students' with the Documentary Filmmakers, with Erasmus students that came with background in theater, music, journalism, making this project really inter- and trans-disciplinar; and finally, for the last essential element, the *long-term configuration*, we always kept in mind the importance of perpetuating or at least, the importance of keeping this project alive for as long as possible, keeping in mind that when the students finish the semester, they will have no further interest in dedicating their time and energy towards this, so this is exactly why we designed some elements that can be permanent – such as the card game, the feature documentary and the website, which can also integrate some more ephemeral elements such as the installations and part of the photography exhibition.

Regarding the fundamental components explained above, we can easily discover them one by one in the *In-Between Worlds Universe*: the *interface* part is already quite obvious – we used all kinds of different interfaces in order to connect artistic concepts and ideas with technologies and with various dissemination techniques, therefore we have multiple different products that can be experimented by the public both online and offline; we created an *auctorial network* by bringing together many students with different specialties, and their coordinators with different experience and different points of view, but we also managed to bring complete strangers to participate in this project with the help of the photography open call, thus having so many co-creators that also had different roles throughout the whole process – some of them

initiated, some of them evaluated, some of them documented it; I also believe we managed to *immerse* the public into the subject of the Universe, because we gave them so many different products to experience and so many approaches to the same topic – we could see the public in the exhibition being curious, wanting to experiment it all, wanting to touch everything, asking questions, trying out the game, experiencing the Virtual Reality installation, watching the movie and interacting with the rest of the installations; the last, but in my opinion, the most important component of a Transmedia Universe, the one that really sets out the tone for the whole project, the foundation on which we had to build from the beginning, the Infinite Narrative Paradigm was achieved firstly by knowing that this is not going to be a simple, common project, it will not be just a documentary, or just another interactive installation, we knew that we have to join forces, work together and create something new, both for ourselves and for the public, and we did so by leaving behind the characteristics of a classical story - fixed formats, unique author, the need for entertainment, the need for conflict and resolution in a story, the need for an ending and a conclusion – and we built in the opposite direction, achieving a story without the beginning-middle-end, achieving harmony in the topic, integrating complex characters with many nuances, focusing on co-creationism and working together even when our skills and ideas did not match.

In conclusion, it rarely happens for a transmedia project to integrate every single essential element and fundamental component, but this time we managed to create a unique, complex and complete Universe – the *In-Between Worlds* project. I would like to mention the rest of the coordinators that helped bring this project alive, Associate Professor Horea Avram and Professor Rodica Otilia Mocan, and of course, the ones who dedicated their time, energy and creativity for months in order to build this Universe, the Digital Interactive Arts students: Lucia Codreanu, Filip Iustin, Florin Adrian Marc and Toma Bărbulescu, the Documentary Filmmaking students: Horațiu Curuțiu, Aida Ilie, Alexandru Popa, Patricia Toma, Anna Lorincz, Raul Petrușe, Marton Varga, Octavian Şarameţ, and the Erasmus students: Selma Bohmelmann, Lucia Goni Muniz, Marina Martinez Mora and Clarissa Silvestrelli. I am very grateful towards everyone for having the chance to work together and I invite the readers to acess the intre-lumi.ro website, if they want to experience at least a small part of this complex Universe on their own.

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