

PERSPECTIVES - THE CURRENCY OF AUDIENCE (SPRING 2025)

SECTION 3: BACK TO THE FUTURE: TRANSMEDIA STRATEGIES FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

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Past issues of the CMF's *Key Trends Report* included sections dedicated to transmedia. The term refers to storytelling that isn't bound to a single medium; rather, the stories are built on the interaction between traditional—usually broadcast—and digital platforms. In the 2010s, some transmedia projects were created organically, and others were born out of funding requirements. For example, a producer may have created a website as an additional piece of content to their TV show, extending their IP into the digital space.

But even as the word “transmedia” fell out of fashion, these once novel digital platforms have become established players in the media landscape. This has led to shifts in how IP and content ripple across platforms. Today, telling a story and sharing IP across different platforms isn't a trend,

it may be the expectation, opening the door to new pipelines for IP creation based on proven audience engagement rather than forced connections (as explored in previous sections).

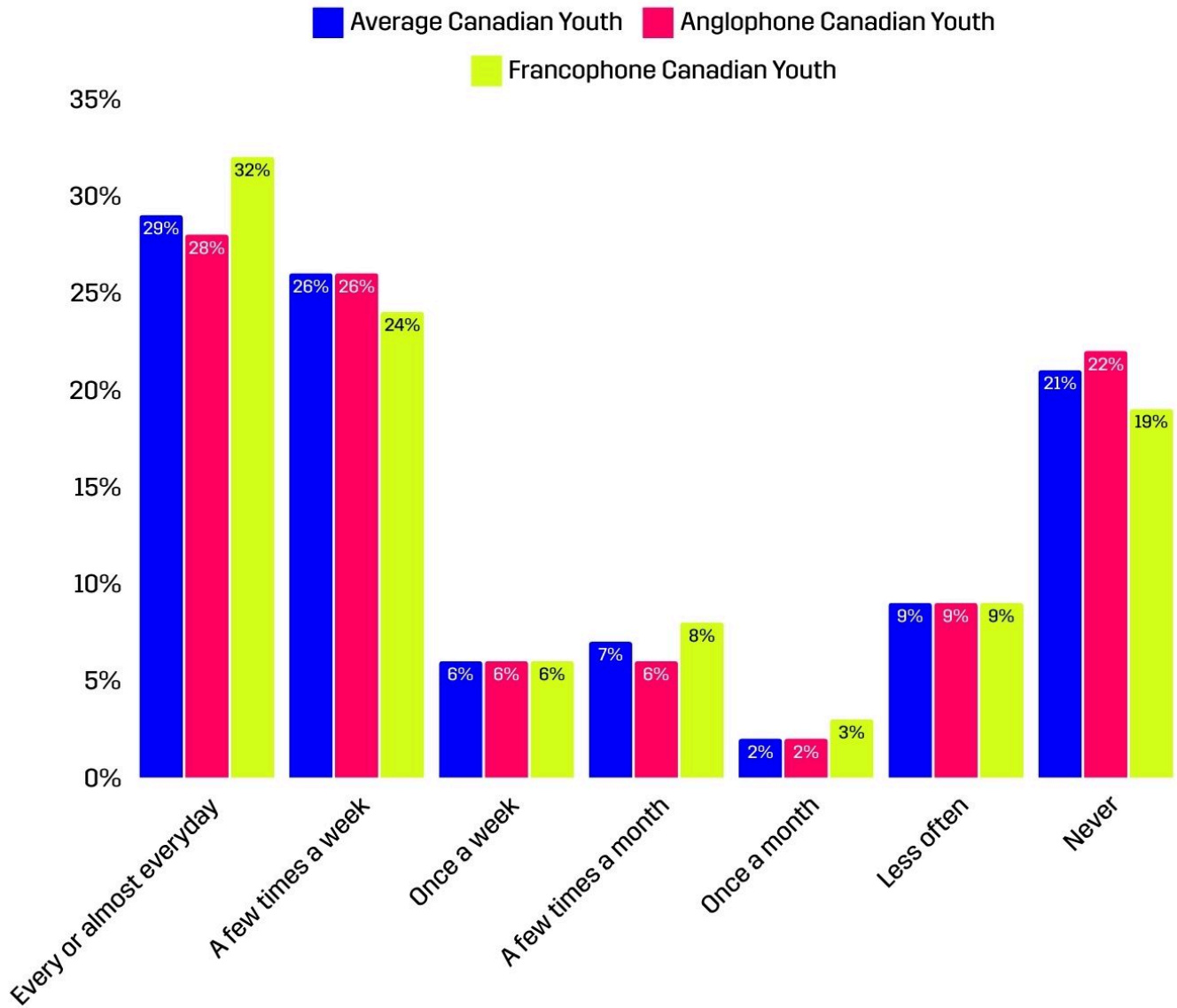
To explore how transmedia laid the groundwork for the current media landscape, we might look to children and youth content made specifically for audiences that have been immersed in digital worlds since birth. Seeing how those audiences interact with content across platforms can help us understand how audiences of the future might engage with storytelling.

WHAT, AND HOW, ARE CHILDREN AND TEENS WATCHING CONTENT TODAY?

This question seems to be at the top of everyone's mind in the industry, as young audiences' migration from traditional TV (e.g., cable TV, satellite TV) to different platforms has been well documented. 2024 data from the Media Technology Monitor (MTM) reveals that 21 per cent of Canadian youths aged 2-17 don't watch traditional TV at all.¹ Still, traditional TV has some presence in their lives. MTM reports that 60 per cent of Anglophone youths under 17 years old and 62 per cent of their Francophones counterparts still watch traditional TV at least once a week. When comparing this data point over the past five years, however, we can see that these viewing habits are drastically lower than they were in 2019. The trend is clear: traditional TV consumption is declining for younger audiences.

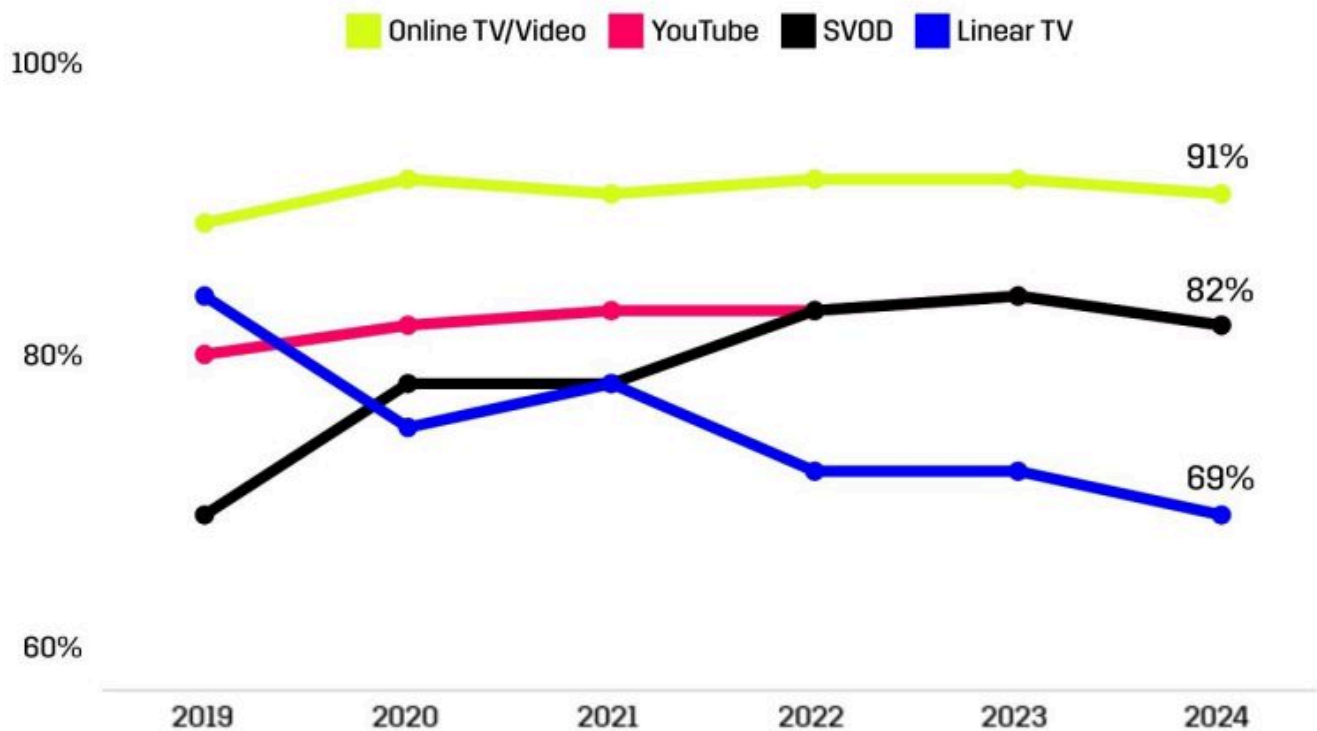
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Frequency of Watching Traditional TV for Canadian Youth



Source: MTM Junior | 2024 National | Canadian children aged 2-17

Canadian Youth Monthly Viewing Habits Over Time FR

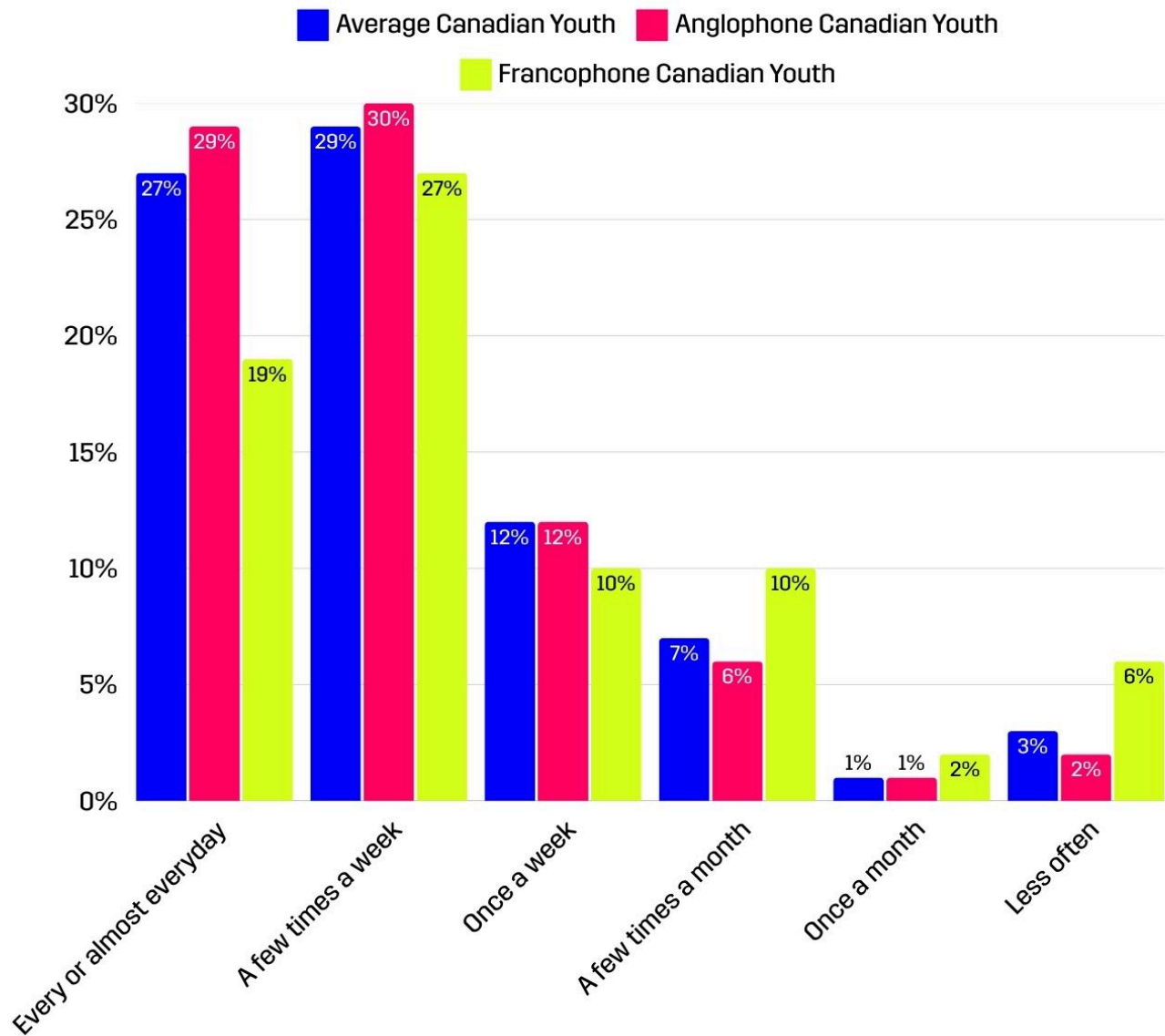


Source: MTM Junior | 2024 National | Canadian children aged 2-17

So how are these audiences entertaining themselves? They're turning to digital platforms and other forms of content. MTM reports that 79 per cent of Canadian children game at least once monthly. Not only that, 28 per cent of Anglophone youth and 18 per cent of Francophone youth shared that they play video games on a near daily basis. YouTube is also a magnet for young audiences, attracting daily viewers among 41 per cent of Canadian children and teens. Although Canadian youth still have one foot in traditional media spaces, they are seeking more entertainment and stories on digital platforms than ever before. And unlike previous generations, they have been doing so their entire lives.

Frequency of Gaming for Canadian Youth

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Source: MTM Junior | 2024 National | Canadian children aged 2-17

DIGITAL ISN'T JUST CONTENT—IT'S COMMUNITY TOO

Stories and content aren't the only things bringing children and teens to digital platforms. It's equally important to consider the draw of their online communities. A few years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions cut young people off from any face-to-face interactions with their peers at a crucial time in their social development. Although some children and teens were already part of online communities, circumstances forced more onto digital platforms to socialize—and they have stayed there.

Many of these virtual communities were created in online video games, showing a crossover between entertainment and social interaction. A Pew Research Centre survey found that 72 per cent of teen gamers played to spend time with others. Their online friendships aren't limited to their real-life friends either, with 47 per cent saying that they have made at least one friend online through video games.² The social connections forged during the pandemic seem here to stay, suggesting that virtual relationships will be a routine part of younger audience's social lives as they grow older.

So, while digital spaces come with some negative effects—too much screentime and uneven moderation standards across platforms—they do provide significant positives. Research shows that digital environments give kids an opportunity to experiment, whether by customizing their avatar or collaborating with others.³ IP and storytelling within these spaces also resonate deeply with kids. 71 per cent of them go on to recreate experiences from their video games in their real-world play.⁴

For better or for worse, kids' digital and real-world lives collide constantly. Entertainment and communities don't uniquely exist in one or the other anymore, and the evidence is clear that this generation rewards content that does both. As such, the modern version of transmedia storytelling capitalizes on opportunities for engagement and connection as stories span across different media forms.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH STORYTELLING UNRESTRICTED BY MEDIUM

Some of the transmedia topics covered in the *Key Trends Report* included the emergence of new digital platforms from Netflix to Twitch, the new genres created by these platforms, and opportunities for crossover. Ten years later, the idea of a TV show having a presence on YouTube or a movie adaptation of a video game isn't revolutionary. When it comes to children and youth storytelling, however, these crossovers are a crucial strategy for engaging with their target audience and potentially expanding it. IP must be malleable and have a presence in multiple forms, and from this emerged an alternate IP development strategy.

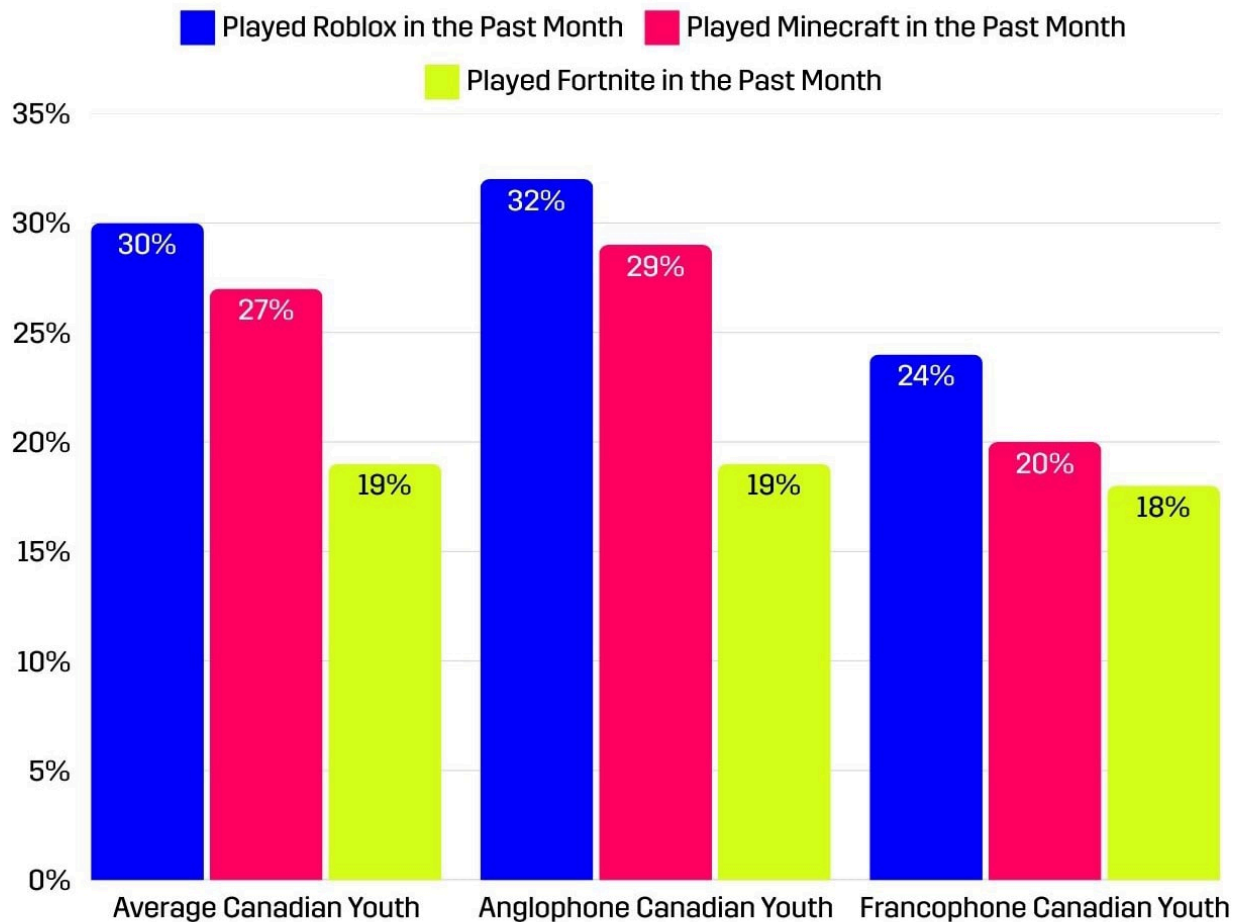
One way to see this kind of mutable IP is through user-generated content (UGC) platforms. Digital creators on these platforms have perfected the art of adapting content to multiple audiences. After all, the creator economy rewards those with a presence on different platforms and who can engage with their audiences wherever they may be at a given time. Additionally, digital creators have been especially popular with young audiences as they specifically foster a sense of community with their audiences. In this way, they can expand their IP into different forms and, by extent, to different media.

Ryan Kaji of *Ryan's World* is a key example of this. What began as a YouTube channel where four-year-old Ryan reviewed children's toys has evolved into a larger production company for children and youth content, ranging from animation to educational videos. In August 2024, the popular channel took a bigger step and brought the IP to a feature film format.⁵ While their massive online audience, which boasts over 38 million subscribers as of writing, made *Ryan's World* a promising IP, this didn't translate into box office success. Nevertheless, it doesn't discredit the model altogether, as the success of *Ryan's World* might be more closely linked to the consumption habits of its core audience. It will be important to see how this movie performs on home streaming, in a format that is maybe more familiar to its fans.

Still, this pipeline—moving from UGC to more traditional AV—does have some success stories for children and youth IP using platforms outside the social media sphere. The online gaming platform Roblox has attracted a large young audience, with 48 per cent of Canadian children aged 7-11 playing at least once a month.⁶ Traditional media has used Roblox's popularity to introduce players to their kid-friendly IP through dedicated games and experiences, such as the BBC's *Wonder Chase* experience.⁷ It could also be used to drum up interest in a more established IP, like Warner Bros. Discovery's *The Amazing World of Gumball Roblox Game*.⁸

Canadian Youth and Online Video Games

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Source: MTM Junior | 2024 National | Canadian children aged 2-17

Roblox, however, has evolved beyond a marketing tool for existing children's IP. The platform has also become a development hub, where creatives can build an audience before expanding the story to different media. *Piñata Smashlings*, created by the toy-led entertainment studio Toikido, began as a Roblox game and quickly gained popularity among its demographic of children aged 6–9. The Canadian animation company Nelvana saw its potential and created a series of shorts based on *Piñata Smashlings* for its YouTube channel. In early 2024, the studio had greenlit an animated TV series.⁹

On paper, this development process is similar to that of *Ryan's World*. However, *Piñata Smashlings* took an intermediate step to test the waters with its audience before jumping into a TV adaptation. This process puts the audience and their desires first, which, as explored in the previous sections, is crucial to the success of IP expansion in today's world.

Transmedia as a term is still tied to its 2010s definition. Nevertheless, the core idea has evolved into an essential part of the modern media landscape. When it comes to children and youth content, cross-platform interactions are the very nature of how younger audiences are consuming content. Modern platforms offer a new pipeline built off these interactions and engagement opportunities to grow IP and audience development before expanding to traditional media forms. Although still in its infancy, this strategy does propose a more organic process than assuming an audience's interest in a website or video game add-on. Informed by how young audiences are interacting with content today, the strategy should continue to appeal to future audiences as each generation becomes more digitally immersed than the last.

FOOTNOTES

1. Media Technology Monitor, MTM Jr., Canadian children aged 2-17.
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9. Milligan, Mercedes. "'Piñata Smashlings' Gets Greenlight for 2D Series from Nelvana & Toikido." Animation Magazine, January 12, 2024. <https://www.animationmagazine.net/2024/01/pinata-smashlings-gets-greenlight-for-2d-series-from-nelvana-toikido/>.

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