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The culture and business of crossmedia productions

Introduction

Today, the culture industries are not driven by storytelling, art, or visionary individuals. The Walt Disney era's focus on end-user experience is replaced by the entertainment industry's need to minimize risk in the face of rising cost of production and advertising, which means that no stand-alone product, whether film, game, or even comic book is worth risking the investment. The risk has to be spread across media, and beyond, to secure the bottom line.

In this paper some of the relations between media content and cross media production is explored, with the focus on movies and games, and implications for cultural theory are critically discussed. The main observation is that the medium no longer is the message (if it ever was), instead, in the words of cross-media producers David Alpert and Rick Jacobs "Movies are now no longer free-standing IP [intellectual property]; they are one piece in a marketing assault". Or, as Jay Lemke (2004) puts it: "maximizing profits compels a strategy of crossing over across as many of these media as possible."

Today, risk-adverse producers and investors seek to capitalize on the marketing by co-launching concepts through multiple media: The game, the film,

the novel, the animated movie, the T-shirt, the action figure, the perfume, the amusement park ride etc. Typical examples are the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* cross-productions. Films like *The Matrix* are followed by a game and the animation film *Animatrix*; this has caught on to the extent that the *Chronicles of Riddick* game/film is accompanied by an animated DVD named on the package, ridiculously¹, “Ani Riddick”.

Another example of this is the concept/license “Death Jr.” Not a film, not a game, not a comic book, not an action figure, but all of the above, and more.² As a Sony PlayStation Portable (PSP) launch title, Death Jr. is a prime example of how concept licenses, rather than content, move between media platforms. This paper will examine what implications this has for the types of message that can be reproduced.

Using Cawelti’s theory (1976) of popular genres, the paper will present a model of cross-media content transfer, showing what must be left behind in content/concept migrations across media, and the role and importance of games as a nexus in this exchange. Will games replace movies as the economical terminal platform (book->comic->film->game) or has game technology and the Hollywood-comparable cost of game production already redefined the cycle? Story, game or sculpture? We need to develop a critical language to address and analyze cross-media assets and their cultural cycles.

The analysis presented here is focused on comparative studies of content. To gain a full perspective on the “poetics” of cross-media productions, however, this ought to be accompanied by a study of the cross-media industry: the economics of cross-media financing, licensing, marketing and distribution.

¹ The animated short film directed by Peter Chung was called “Dark Fury” (2004) and “ani Riddick” completely misses the elegant wordplay of the “animatrix” title, but the logic of pre-awareness dictated an Animatrix-like name, to signal a similar relationship between this product and the main films.

² <http://www.deathjr.com/>

Transferring “content” – migration, franchise, branding

“Content” is a tricky word. When used it usually signals the importance of something other than that it refers to, usually the container. Those who actually focus on the “content” – say, a professor of literature or visual art, would never use the word to describe their object; the “content of Shakespeare” or “the content of Botticelli”. It is used when something other than the “content” is the main focus, such as the medium and its material, technological, social or political conditions. In this paper, however, the focus is on the content-side of content, and not on the container-aspect. However, the key question is whether content can be transferred between media, so here, too, the term is mostly used negatively.

What is a crossmedia production? There are two forms, synchronous and asynchronous, which we might also see as the “strong” and “weak” versions: Crossmedia productions that produce the media versions in parallel, and productions that take place sequentially, as a migration between media, and where the first instance usually is seen as the original content. At some point the latter becomes merely an *adaptation*, where a work is translated from one medium to another, without any plan for such transfer at the time of first creation. The distinction between adaptation and crossmedia production can be difficult to maintain, however, as many works may have been made with crossmedia migration in mind. Typically, low-cost media such as books afford a later transfer to high-cost media (movies) that often depends upon, and is initiated by, the success of the initial product, while high-cost media products afford simultaneous transfers to low-cost media (e.g. novelizations and comic book versions). It should be pointed out that crossmedia productions do not have to be entertainment, but could be documentary, journalistic or didactic instead, but the present perspective will be limited to entertainment crossmedia productions and properties that involve a game in their chain of output.

Historically, it is possible to trace crossmedia productions back to antiquity, where a play or poem in manuscript form, both intended to be performed and read, in principle could be seen as an early example. Similarly, 18th century sheet music allowing upper-class families to recreate contemporary

chamber music compositions in their homes might be seen as an early parallel to the music recording industry or the home VCR revolution of the early 80es.³ This is not the place to give an account of the history of crossmedia production, but it should be noted that the principle is old and covers many genres and types of content.

Before the advent of commercial games some three decades ago, movies were the normal terminal in the chain of crossmedia migration. An intellectual property might start as a play, a novel or a comic book, or even as a song or a painting, and would migrate up the cost chain and end up as a Hollywood movie. An obvious example is Tracy Chevallier's novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), based on Vermeer's 1665 painting, and turned into a movie directed by Peter Webber in 2003, with Scarlett Johansson in the title role. Here we note how Vermeer's visual style bypasses a link in the chain and informs the movie directly.

Today, however, game productions are starting to rival movie productions in terms of cost, and therefore also the position on top of the cost chain. Movies and computer games are now the most interesting cross-media pair, because in addition to being rather different in terms of cognitive and social affordances, their modes of production are more alike than most other output types. According to David Alpert and Rick Jacobs (2004), the average cost of a Hollywood film in 2003 was \$63.8 million. In addition, another \$39 million was used to market each movie, making the total \$103M. Game productions are still less costly on average, but may start to reach comparable figures in the near future, as the "third generation consoles" (the PlayStation 3, the Xbox360 and the Nintendo Revolution) dramatically increase the need for animation labor because of the more demanding graphics resolutions and formats such as High Definition TV.

As Alpert and Jacobs (2004) point out, movies are increasingly remade, not originals:

—Novels (Harry Potter)

³ About the latter, see Wasser 2001.

- Comics (Spider Man)
- Games (Tomb Raider, Doom)
- TV Shows (Starsky and Hutch)
- Remakes (Italian Job)
- Ride (Pirates of the Caribbean)

The reason for this, they claim, is that *pre-awareness* reduces risk, by making the marketing of the movie less costly and more effective. And as we see in the games industry, the same trend exists there; most bestselling titles are sequels or movie franchises, often both. Given this financial logic, where cost-recovery is the core value of the operation, certain observations can be framed about the types of transformations afforded by the crossmedia industry:

- 1) A single-medium launch is a lost opportunity, a flawed business plan
- 2) The health and timeliness of the overall production and launch is more important than the integrity of an individual piece
- 3) The individual pieces should add to the total franchise/brand awareness
- 4) Ease of transfer (crossability) becomes a critical aspect of the operation

Therefore, the somewhat romantic notion of “crossmedia content” should be replaced with the more accurate term “crossmedia branding,” which may include transfer of the content to a greater or lesser degree.

How is content transferred? Does it even have to be? The logic of advertising suggests that the logo is all you need to brand successfully (e.g. “Batman candy”). However, audience acceptance is also critical to the health of the brand, and the fulfillment of audience expectations clearly depends on medium conventions and affordances. In other words, producers cannot stray too far from audience expectations if they wish to keep the brand healthy. This was clearly seen in Tim Burton’s risky lead casting of the comic actor Michael Keaton in the first *Batman* movie, which was met with significant pre-launch skepticism, especially among fans of the comic book. In that case the product was strong enough to succeed, but a less successful example may be found in the game *Enter the Matrix* (2003) whose greatest disappointment may have been the

simple fact that the audience's expectations of a *Matrix* game franchise far exceeded the actual game's ability to outshine its competition, especially since *Max Payne*, two years earlier, had implemented the "bullet time" effect of the first movie. Although *Enter The Matrix* made a profit, it was also the most highly shop-retained game ever, and it did not get great reviews, which made the license owner, Warner Bros., unhappy enough to suggest that licensed games that did not receive good review ratings would be penalized by higher royalty fees, to prevent brand damage.

What transfers?

To fully investigate the aesthetic mechanisms of content transfer, many examples are needed. In this paper, relatively few are used, so the conclusions reached must remain tentative and in need of further verification. Clearly, a content migration from one medium to another depends on a number of factors, making each case special. However, some general observations can be made, even at the outset: Adaptations are not always successful. Financial success can sometimes be due to substantial marketing and pre-awareness, rather than high quality, but at the cost of possible brand damage. And since production companies have a fairly realistic sense of what will work, they select projects with the best chances for success. In the film-to-game business, it is easy to spot the pattern: Only certain types of film become games. Keywords here are action, science fiction, horror, war; in other words, spatial spectacle. Interestingly, games don't seem to afford the transfer of many genres that we recognize from book-to-film: romance, psycho-drama, period/historical, biography. Successful book-to-film transfers such as *Remains of the Day* or comic-book to film transfers such as *Ghostworld* will never make the leap to game, and for good reason: the narrative affinities and affordances shared by books and films are not shared by games. In other words, we are not witnessing crossmedia storytelling, but rather crossmedia spectacle-making.

One interesting example is Walt Disney's last amusement park ride from Disneyland, *Pirates of the Caribbean* (1973). This is a boat ride through a spectacular series of tableaux, showing (among other things) grinning skeletons,

mounds of gold and treasure, imprisoned pirates, a sea to land cannon battle, the sacking of a town, and pirates celebrating and singing the famous “Yo ho, yo ho! A pirate’s life for me!” In time for its 30-year anniversary, Disney released a film (subtitled *The Curse of the Black Pearl*) and a game bearing the same title, but without a subtitle. Comparing these three works, however reveals that there is almost nothing in common between any of them, except the title and the brand logo. The characters of the film, starring Johnny Depp, Keira Knightley, and Orlando Bloom, do not figure in either the game or the ride. A few individual tableaux from the ride, such as the cannon battle and the jailed pirates trying to lure the keys from a dog, can be seen briefly in the film, but most of the tableaux are not transferred. The film tells a story of love, inheritance, and release from immortality, themes not found in the ride or the game. In fact, the only element from the film found in the game is the voice of Keira Knightley, used as voiceover. This is understandable given the fact that the game was commissioned by Disney very late in the production process, and was conceived independently as the follow-up to a strategy / RPG (role playing game) hybrid called *Sea Dogs*, and was originally destined to become *Sea Dogs II*. More striking, then, is the lack of overlap between the ride and the film. Even rides with “narrative” content, such as the *Peter Pan* or the *Winnie-the-Pooh* rides in Disneyland, or *The Mummy* or *Jurassic Park* rides at Universal Studios in Hollywood, do not recapture tellable story moments that would be associated with the books or the films of the same name. The rides depend on pre-awareness of the narrative, but offers nothing narrative in return. Amusement park rides, obviously, are not narratives, but obey other laws of presentation. To get a deeper perspective of this, let us turn to popular fiction theorist John Cawelti, who makes a distinction between two levels of popular fiction, 1) the level of cultural convention, where we find the stereotypes, characters, the clichés and the environment (e.g. Europe in the Middle Ages, the Wild West), and 2) the level of the underlying structure, which is a series of events (boy meets girls, boy loses girl etc). Only the latter is where the story is actually told, but the amusement park rides and the games contain the first level without really affording the latter.

This can be seen even more clearly when we look at the transfers that actually work across the story-game frontier. Book-film-game transfers do exist, and perhaps the best examples here are the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* franchises. If we study these carefully, we see that all elements that transfer between book and film may not travel all the way to the game. The actual events of the books are usually transferred reasonably faithfully to the films, except where length dictates that elements may be removed to shorten the viewing time. In the games however, the storylines from the books/films are not recapitulated faithfully, if at all.

Again, Cawelti's model applies, with the layer of cultural conventions being transferred, but the underlying narrative structure not at all, or bent almost out of recognition. Playing Gandalf in the Electronic Arts 2003 *Return of the King* game involves zapping orcs endlessly and performing ninja-like moves with sword and staff, but with none of the inventiveness and dignity that the narrative Gandalf would have displayed. Are we playing Gandalf, or merely a Gandalf-like puppet? On the other hand, one would also have hoped that the rich, beautiful world of Middle-earth would have been more freely explorable in the game, but instead we are served a very linear action corridor, a unicursal labyrinth that offers as much individual choice as a train ride.

Harry Potter games such as the *Chamber of Secrets* (2002) are more openly explorable, since one can wander around Hogwarth and explore in a multicursal fashion, but here also the transfer of narrative events from the book are nowhere as faithful as in the movie. Furthermore, the main game event elements, such as collecting jelly beans and fighting various monsters, are not derived from the narrative works, and correspond to nothing in them. Again, Cawelti can be used to describe a transfer that, like chemical warfare, kills the people (or turns them into brainless zombies) but leaves the buildings untouched.

A possible alternative to the sequential media migration can be found in the crossmedia franchise *Death, jr.* *Death, jr.* is not a movie, comic book, game, T-shirt, action figure, belt-buckle, or piece of jewelry, but rather, all of the above. *Death, jr.* started life as a game engine demo, and was soon licenced for several simultaneous media productions. Even before any audience had gotten to know this new phenomenon, it made money on cross-licencing rights. The idea behind

Death, jr. is very simple: he is just a normal kid going to school, but with a very special father, the grim reaper. Death, jr. is the logical offspring of crossmedia productions and one which offers a flexibility of freedom that already established franchises cannot match, but in terms of pre-awareness, it is still quite a risk. Death, jr. offers an alternative model to the other examples here, which should throw new light on the evolution of the culture industry into the age of crossmedia. Unfortunately, the PSP game, launched in August 2005, was not a success, so the future for the Death Jr franchise looks a bit grim at the time of writing.

Lost in Translation

According to David Alpert and Rick Jacobs, there are three things to look for in the evaluation of a possible film-to-game transfer: 1) Iconic characters with high recognition value; 2) an interesting universe, and 3) a “high concept” that would translate into a gameplay mechanic. If you have all three, you may be able to make an interesting game, but it is still difficult. What is lacking from this formula, of course, is story. Partly because you don’t really need it, if you have these key ingredients, and partly because, as the *LOTR* and *Harry Potter* examples show, you can’t really use it anyway. You can transfer characters (up to a point) and universes (unproblematically), and any kind of action gimmick such as bullet time; but for games to work, gameplay, not story, is key. A predefined story will mess up the game if followed too slavishly. Therefore the method is to extract the spectacular, the spatial and the idiosyncratic, and develop events and waypoints that will nod to the story of the original work, while keeping a firm eye on the bottom line of gameplay quality.

element	Ride to movie	Book to movie	Movie to game	Game to movie
Storyline	No	Ok	Not really	No
Events	Hardly	Ok	Hardly	Ok
Universe	Ok	Ok	Ok	Ok
Character	No	Ok	Partly	Expanded

Crossmedia Transfer Table

Previous commentators on crossmedia (e.g. Jenkins 2003, Klastrup and Tosca 2004) have pointed out that “world” is a key transferable element, especially when it comes to game transfers. Here I have preferred to use the more open word “universe”, as it allows for the possibility of only a rudimentary compatibility between the content of two productions. However, even here, the term is a metaphor at best. There is no “world” or “universe” as such being transferred between media platforms, only partial and more or less faithfully represented elements. The orcs and elves of Blizzard’s *Warcraft* universe is clearly not identical to the orcs and elves of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, so Cawelti’s idea of a “cultural convention” seems more appropriate when describing the kinship between the various Tolkien-derived (and semi-derived) universes, or even between the universes by a single creator, such as Richard Garriott’s various *Ultima* games.

Conclusion

This preliminary study shows that crossmedia transfer happens relatively smoothly between forms that are alike, such as books and films, and less so between forms that have strong structural differences, such as amusement park rides, games and narratives. There may be examples that contradict this or tell a different story, but the economically grounded practice of the entertainment industry gives a good indication of what is and is not viable. Cawelti’s model provides a very relevant indicator of what can and cannot be translated easily, and is a good way to get past the confusing notion of storytelling, and instead focus on, and attempting to understand, universe-building, character-construction, and the translation of concepts into media-specific mechanisms. This way, we can also begin to see what traditional authors have been doing when they construct the universes they use to grow their narratives.

Crossmedia productions come in many shapes, and depend on a large number of arts: storytelling, game design, and concept development among them. But a good sense for business may be the most important one. To understand this market-driven logic, the research strategy seems simple enough: Follow the money!

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