

**Transmedia traversals:
marketing meaning and identity**

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1. Introduction

In the study of multimodality, we seek to understand not simply how multiple sign systems or semiotic resources are co-deployed to make new meanings, but also how the ways we do this are shaped by the role of media in our society. In this [paper](#) I am going to sketch out a theoretical model for the relationships among media, identities, and the political economy of new globalizing markets. I will illustrate this model by reference to two new and changing social phenomena: the development of *transmedia*, intertextual networks that cross the boundaries of genres and media, and the emergence of *traversals*, our ways of making meanings and living our lives across the boundaries between sites and institutions. I will propose that commercial transmedia promote systems of differentiated and hierarchized identities, *identity markets*, which we learn to re-appropriate and re-organize as members of social networks.

Multimodal media make meaning by intersecting the semiotic resources of language, visual display, sound and music, cinematic movement, material artifacts, and abstract animation. If we consider action itself to be a semiotic system (Lemke, 1984; Martinec, 1998, 2001), then in the case of interactive multimedia, we may imagine a dynamic semiotic cycle in which users interpret what is being displayed to them across many media, initiate or respond with action meaningful to them, and then interpret the reaction of the media system (Aarseth, 1997). We can analyze such multimodal processes and systems in terms of a very simple *cross-contextualization principle* I have proposed (Lemke, 1998), building on the work of Michael Halliday (1978) and others in the functional linguistics and social semiotics traditions (e.g. Martin, 1992; Kress, van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Thibault, 2000).

Halliday had originally proposed in his analysis of language as a semiotic resource that every utterance in principle makes meaning along three simultaneous axes: presenting a state of affairs (*ideational meaning*), taking a stance toward content and interlocutors (*interpersonal-attitudinal meaning*), and defining informational and textual wholes and continuities (*textual-cohesive meaning*). Kress and van Leeuwen and others (e.g. O'Toole, 1994) have shown that visual semiotics in drawings, diagrams, painting, and architecture could be similarly analyzed, and my own work on scientific publications, political cartoons, and NASA websites (Lemke, 2002; see also <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jaylemke/papers/polcart.htm>) established that the same scheme applied when linguistic text and other media were integrated in various genres.

In each genre there was a different sense of what constituted ‘the whole work’ and therefore which signs were to be interpreted in relation to which other ones. In a political cartoon, often enough, the humor is apparent neither from the image alone nor from the captioning text by itself, but only from their juxtaposition in the whole cartoon. We interpret the presented visual content differently because we align its meaning with that of the presented content of the accompanying text (and vice versa, in multiple possible ways). We simultaneously do this for their respective signs indicating interpersonal intimacy or distance and also for various evaluations of the presented content such as its importance or desirability. Finally, we connect one part of the image with another because this is suggested by the text, and we make new cohesive ties within the text because of semantic cues provided by the image. What we do in some genres with text and image, we do in others with the addition of musical or other auditory signs (van Leeuwen, 1999), dynamic movements as in animation or cinema (Martinec, 1998, 2001), and even our own motions and actions in clicking the video-recorder remote or moving the computer mouse.

The space of semiotic meanings is multiplicative: it expands combinatorially in possibilities, only to contract the more intently to some nexus of instantial meaning in each actual multimodal sign or ‘text’. The meaning of each lexical sign can be interpreted, from its range of potential meanings, not merely by its syntagmatic lexical context and its paradigmatic set of (not-deployed) lexical alternatives, but together with its visual or musical co-text (and absent co-texts, the signs-not-chosen). So many more combinations of signs from multiple modalities are possible in multimedia, and though many fewer are typical, nonetheless each conjoint multimodal sign-complex is one choice out of a much larger universe of possibilities, and therefore indexes one much more specific, specified meaning when it occurs. *As Table 1 indicates, this multiplicative specification of meaning occurs along three meaning axes; three generalized semiotic functions are simultaneous in all meaning making acts or signs and have corresponding linguistic and visual functions. In many cases, whether by convention or creative arrangement, the Presentational content, the Interpersonal-attitudinal stance, and the Organization of the whole work mutually assist in specifying one another, not only within each modality, as we expect, but also across modalities.*

Meaning Dimension	Semiotic Functions
Presentational	Processes, relations, participants, circumstances (Language: topical content; Visual: Iconography)
Orientalational	Producer-interpreter relationships, semiotic actions, attitudes to presentational content (Language: interpersonal-rhetorical; visual: perspective)
Organizational	Part-whole structure, cohesion and continuity by similarity and difference, information structure (Language: textualization; Visual: composition)

Table 1: Three generalized semiotic functions

So there is in this sense a double multiplication: each semiotic modality multiplied by each of the others in use, *and* each axis of meaningfulness of each modality multiplied by each other axis, both within that modality, and across all the modalities. **The cross-multiplying modalities of multimedia, each contributing to overall Presentational content, Orientational stance and attitude, and Organizational structure and cohesion are shown in Table 2.** This awesome potential accounts for the ways in which multimedia can be confusing, overwhelming, and amazing. This is the full sign-potential of our cultural traditions, seldom if ever fully realized in the past because of technological and resource limitations. From the Eleusinian mysteries, to the cathedral High Mass, to Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerke*, to sound-film, color television, music video, and now three-dimensional, interactive, immersive digital virtual worlds, we have been exploring the possibilities of multimodality for centuries. Possibilities both for the better and for the worse.

All of these media and their genres have become instruments of power and privilege. Ideologies which have naturalized beliefs, attitudes, and values congenial to those in power have been embedded in and promulgated historically through all these multimedia. When mass-circulated media moved from folk-tradition to centralized production and distribution, control of the ideological content of media became an available tool of power. The art of the cathedrals, the pamphleteer’s and newspaper’s printed texts, illustrated magazines, phonograph recordings, radio broadcasts, and on to the newer media which dominate the landscape of signs today have all been used for such purposes. We are, however, large complex societies and our elites are not monolithic. There are fundamentalist Christian television broadcasts, films, and now computer games (e.g. *Eternal Forces*, <http://www.eternalforces.com/>) in the US and other nations, and in many places also fundamentalist Muslim media, which I highlight because they are among the most influential wide-circulation media resisting, at times, the dominant ideologies and political economy of global capitalism. Most media, however, are coming under the ownership of multinational corporations which control the channels of mass distribution. Among these media I include not only publishing, film, music, and games, but also their less explicitly ideological but *equally semiotic*

Modality	Meaning Dimensions		
Textual	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational
Typographic	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational
Image	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational
Vocal	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational
Musical	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational
Sound Effects	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational
Animation	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational
Video	Presentational,	Orientational,	Organizational

Table 2: Cross-multiplying modalities of multimedia

cultural partners: fashion, food, and consumer merchandise of all kinds (Barthes, 1967, 1977; van Leeuwen, 1999; van Leeuwen, Caldas-Coulthard, 2002). The marketing of all these signifying artifacts positions them as indexical signs of particular meanings, identities, and statuses within market ideologies.

As recently as 10 years ago this would have been more or less the whole story. Today this picture has begun to change fundamentally, and with it, perhaps, the future relationships of multimedia and society.

2. From multimedia to transmedia

As meaning-makers today, we, especially the youngest of us, increasingly live our lives *across* institutions and media, and we make meanings with all their resources that no single medium or institution can control. Transmedia franchises pursue us, colonizing the chronotopes of postmodern life to array the branded content of their media products everywhere we look and go.

It began perhaps with disco mixes of dance records: a DJ would mix and match not only wholes, but parts of not just one recording, but two or more to make a new musical and dance phenomenon. We recognize it as post-modern in its rejection of the integrity of 'the whole work' and its cannibalizing fragments to make something of a new kind. At about the same time, we learned to 'channel surf', flicking our remote controlled televisions from one channel to another to extract a perverse pleasure from the ludicrous juxtapositions of dramatic scenes with advertisements for floor polish. We made meaning across not just channels, but across video genres and across domains of institutional control. Today we surf the web, jumping from screen to screen, site to site, genre to genre, source to source. And we surf a good bit of our lives, too, cycling our attention from conversation to mobile phone to advertising poster to PDA and laptop email, chat, and video.

These random or creative *traversals* as I have begun to call them (Lemke, 2005a) appear symptomatic not just of viewing habits, but of lives. The defining characteristic of a traversal is that it makes meaning across boundaries: between media, genres, sites, institutions, contexts. It may and usually does extend across multiple timescales as well: minutes, hours, days, years. Fewer and fewer young people today say they want to pursue just one career for their whole lives. Fewer and fewer even want to focus on just one career or life project at a time. Whether in our channel- and web-surfing, in our days spent juggling media and communications, or in our plans for the longer term, we are adopting the strategy of the traversal. In learning, many of the brightest students feel oppressed by having to learn only in a school. They want to, and on their own do learn from peers, from online communities, through extended social networks, through media, through part-time jobs and projects. They find the contributions of school lag behind their learning curves, out-of-date, out-of-touch, out-of-sympathy (Diepstraten, du Bois-Reymond, Vinken, 2006).

Many of us, to varying degrees, participate in this traversal culture, and particularly in its new media and new online social networking communities. The

purveyors of traditional, centralized-production, mass-distribution media are worried. Our 'eyeballs', as they count them, are moving away from their messages, their marketing, their ideological influence. We watch less television, and more of what we watch is niche-market cable or even internet channels. We go to fewer movies. We read and watch less news, and much of that is online and from multiple, potentially contradictory sources. The family, the workplace, and the church are no longer our main avenues of social networking. We can and do meet people of all kinds online and share passions and opinions. The great media combines are trying to acquire new, and perhaps evanescent online social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *YouTube*, but it's not likely their senior managers understand how different the political economy of these media will be.

The prime disseminators of globalist, neo-liberal political and economic ideology today are above all not the journalists but the marketers. They are out to sell products and services, but with them, explicitly or more often not, come beliefs, attitudes, and values. They sell their goods by associating them with other products that make direct appeals to our consumer identities: the novels and characters we love, the stories and television programs we still watch, the music we respond to, the games we play, the films we enjoy. They create identity packages, connecting these shoes with those sports figures with some imaginary or actual social identity type for the prospective consumer. They market the shoes through the sports figures but also in conjunction with the sports programming that will get some of us to watch in the first place. Other goods are marketed in conjunction with fantasy content, or with high culture content. Every identity type is a market. Good marketing means selling the right goods, through the right media, to the right identities. At the same time, marketing also *produces* social identity types.

Many of the social identity types of young people, including the ur-type of the 'teenager', were created by marketing media in the music industry, starting in the 1950s. The 'new woman' or 'career woman' of the 1970s was similarly very much their production, not as an initial social phenomenon, but in terms of the identity package wrapped around it. Teenagers or new women, there were particular clothes to be worn, hairstyles to be fashioned, magazines to be read, cars or music to be bought, images to be identified with and dis-identified from. Analyze any market, from super-premium vodka to brands of computers, from music to video games, and with a little basic semiotic analysis you will readily identify both the identity market and the package of consumer goods, styles, attitudes, beliefs, and values that goes with each of the identities it offers.

Naturally these marketed identities are not independent. They are differentiated into neat semiotic systems by contrasting features. They are also, though not so visibly to casual consumers, hierarchically ranked into superior and inferior sorts of people according to the values of the dominant groups who shape these identity markets. We can in fact think of an *identity market* as a semiotic system of identity types, differentiated primarily as consumers of different kinds of media and goods, but also secondarily as people who identify with certain beliefs, attitudes, values, and lifestyles.

We are all becoming entangled in the workings of these identity markets, which have become, I believe, the single most powerful new strategy for organizing society to suit the interests of those with the power to do so.

And we are all also struggling to keep free of these entanglements. We want to fashion our own identities, traversal-style and eclectically, from the offerings of the consumer markets. We move from store to store, in the street, the mall or online, looking to buy what makes us feel more like the person we want to be. We move from media to media trying to shape our own styles, beliefs, and values. We participate in multiple and changing social networks as part of this important identity work. We want to be bricoleurs, not dupes.

And we are pursued, everywhere we go, by transmedia franchises.

3. Transmedia Harry

Hollywood discovered long ago that it could ‘adapt’ classic and popular novels to its medium and find for these films a ready-made audience. Walt Disney Studios, often an innovator in Hollywood, discovered that children who loved their cartoon characters would plead with parents to buy merchandise, produced under a license or franchise, which portrayed the characters. Today ‘intellectual property’ may begin its media life as book (Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*), film (*Star Wars*), television series (*Star Trek*), cartoon (*Yu-gi-Oh!*), graphic novel (*Spiderman*), or game (*Lara Croft*) and spawn all the other media and genres along with merchandise of every description.

You can buy replica swords and jewelry from *The Lord of Rings*, and the infamous candies from the world of *Harry Potter*. The constellation of media and genres united around a single brand, logo, or mythos and controlled through the legalities of contracts and claims of intellectual property rights (much disputed in law and the courts) may be called a *transmedia franchise* (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; Lemke, 2005b). Transmedia raise very interesting issues for the theory of multimedia signs, as well as for our understanding of the relations of media, markets, identities, and social systems (see Table 3).

Most fundamentally, there is the question of how we make meaning across the components of a transmedia franchise? There is no doubt that people do this, and many younger fans will consider that your knowledge of the ‘world’ of the franchise is wholly inadequate if you have only read the books or only seen the movies or only

Transmedia Franchises	
(a) Harry Potter	(d) Star Trek
(b) Lord of the Rings	(e) The Matrix
(c) Star Wars	(f) America’s Army

Table 3: Some successful transmedia franchises

played the games. Even casual readers will notice inconsistencies, and no one can very well miss the fact that Harry Potter as described to your imagination by the books, Harry as seen in the book cover art in different editions, Harry as visualized by the computer games, and Harry as portrayed by an actor in the films *look* different. They act differently; they feel different to us. Who then is the *real* Harry for us? How do fans construct a single, or composite, or even multiplex identity for Harry? The answer might give us some important clues as to how we construct our own identities out of similarly diverse experiences. People identify with *something* transmedially. What?

There is no one-to-one mapping among an animated game avatar, a living actor, and a verbal characterization in print. There is no simple intertextuality between an interactive game in which you animate the character of Harry and a silent scene with musical accompaniment in the film. We need an effective theory and analytical practice of cross-modal intertextuality to even begin to understand what is happening in transmedia meaning-making.

We have always had films and novels, but in this case transmedia meaning is being made on an entirely different scale. There are several Harry Potter novels (www.jkrowling.com), several films (some with different actors in the same roles, <http://harrypotter.warnerbros.com>), and several games (<http://www.mastertbemagic.com>). There is a lot of merchandise as well (see the amazon.com “Harry Potter Store” for a sampling). Theo van Leeuwen has begun the effort of developing a semiotics of toys, enough to show us that they, too, can play a full role in the transmedia semiotic mix (e.g. van Leeuwen, Caldas-Coulthard, 2002). In the case of the older *Lord of the Rings* franchise, there are not only the original four books, but additional posthumously edited books of Tolkien’s work, and other franchised uses of his characters and mythos. There are not only the three recent films, but also some older animated versions. There are at least a half-dozen videogames (and more coming), each with dozens of hours of interactive immersion in the mythos, interpreting and extending it, and there is an extensive catalogue of merchandise of all sorts (see the *LOTR* Fan Shop at <http://www.lotrfanshop.com>). In the *Star Wars* franchise, in addition to all the original movies and merchandise, there are innumerable franchised books set in the mythos, many extended-play games, and *Star Wars Galaxies*, a persistent online world in which you can spend essentially unlimited time (<http://starwarsgalaxies.station.sony.com>). All these franchises also include music, in some cases offered as separate tunes or albums for purchase, and some of it is quite popular. For all these there are also complex, interactive websites and associated online multimedia.

While these are among the most famous, there are many, many more well known transmedia franchises with millions of fans, each, ranging in age from young children to early middle-aged adults at least. Today every successful popular fiction aims to spawn a world-spanning transmedia franchise. And many do. Franchises are not limited to fictions. The power of these new media to engage users in ideologically permeated worlds has not been lost on the armed forces of the United States, whose popular *America’s Army* gaming franchise (<http://www.americasarmy.com/>) aims to recruit players to its war ‘doctrine’, and to military service.

Let us try to build up, step by step, some of the complexity of transmedia. That complexity, I am arguing, is not simply the multimodal complexity of the signs of the works included in the franchise. It also includes the complexity of the dispositions of users to interpret and identify with (or dis-identify from) semiotic elements (e.g. characters, themes, environments, events and outcomes) presented by the works. It extends further to the complexity of the identity markets which help shape our dispositions, and to the social networks within which we conduct our interactions with the works. We must never forget that the meanings of a sign are determined not by its qualities alone, but by the interpretive conventions of a community.

Begin with the first *Harry Potter* book (Rowling, 1997). It operated initially on its own, and our usual resources for critical discourse analysis should do quite well in helping us understand how its meaning effects are produced. Then came first one sequel and then others. Our theories of intertextuality assist us in analyzing how composite meaning effects arise with such sequel media. But then *Potter* became a publishing phenomenon. The ‘content’ of the *Harry Potter* universe or mythos started to be represented in other media than books. In print advertisements with new visual images, in bookstore displays on different size scales, in discussions on television and interviews with the author. In print and television news stories about the ‘phenomenon’ and various public reactions to it. Then came the first film, which is of course not an exact transposal of the book, but an interpretation, with some variations in plot and ‘facts’, and with actors interpreting characters and a director (and numerous others) interpreting scenes, moods, settings, etc. Add to these the advertising for the film, much of it also in the video medium. Now read that first book again, or another in the series, and the meanings you make will be influenced significantly by the representations of characters and places and relationships in the films. Is the film as seen in theatres and as shown on television even an instance of the same medium, or do we count them separately? They certainly do not afford the same experience phenomenologically. Of course the books also have official websites, and so do the films, of which there are now several. The websites and the DVD editions of the films also contain information, and whole scenes, that are not available in the theatrical releases of the films or the original editions of the books. They also expand and hybridize

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| a | 6 Harry Potter novels and counting; 2 additional authorized books |
| b | 4 motion pictures, 5th coming in 2007; DVDs and added content |
| c | 3 official multimedia interactive websites (Rowling’s, Warner Bros, EA Games) |
| d | 5 interactive video and computer games |
| e | Audio CDs of film score music, sheet music, mobile phone ringtones |
| f | Licensed merchandise: clothing, jewelry, wands, figurines, toys, candy |
| g | Unofficial guidebooks and analyses |
| h | Dozens of extensive fan websites, 3 major ones; discussion forums |
| i | Over 400,000 works of fan fiction on two sites alone |
| j | Thousands of printed, fan-produced anime graphic novels (doujinsho, Japan) |
| k | And more ... |

Table 4: Transmedia Harry

the Potter world to include authors, actors, directors and the stories of the writing of the books and making of the films.

Is that all? Have we fully catalogued the elements of this transmedia franchise? No, indeed. There are also, very significantly, the *fansites*: the unofficial websites that compile and organize information from many sources, interpret and speculate, and in fact encourage and publish new fictions ‘in the universe of’ *Harry Potter* written by fans, by readers and viewers (e.g. www.Mugglenet.com, www.the-leaky-cauldron.org). There is also the merchandise: clothes, swords, wands, and even candy (<http://harrypotter.wbshop.com/>, <http://www.whimsicalley.com/>). These items are not just use-defined commodities, they are also semiotic media that directly or indirectly advertise the films and books, and advertise each other. They advertise the franchise. They increase the economic value of the franchise, the licenses, the intellectual property, and of each other. A *Harry Potter* image, logo, or name can be stamped onto virtually anything today and increase its exchange value – for some market (see Table 4).

For what market? Who is willing to pay more for something that is linked to the *Harry Potter* franchise? How can this market be characterized? Is it an identity market? It is not basically product-centered. It is more nearly franchise-centered, but what does that mean? It means that there is a special appeal or attraction in some semiotic elements of this ‘universe’, this fictional world, including its characters and events, its ethos and mythos. A disposition to identify with, and value, these semiotic elements has come into being among a large segment of the population. How? Certainly through our encounters with the individual media presentations of the franchise, and even more through the synergy or mutual reinforcement among all these encounters. I would not say that individuals take on a *Harry Potter* franchise identity, but there has at least been some modification or addition, some development of many people’s identities to include a disposition to identify with semiotically recognizable instances of the *Harry Potter* universe. A disposition to look forward to the next book or movie, to have become through this identity disposition a part of the *Harry Potter* market, a prospective paying customer.

A *Harry Potter* market is being created, and with it some development of identities in the direction of identification with some of its semiotic features. Those features cross-over across media, genres, and institutions. They are transmedia semiotic features. Note that this is quite distinct from multimedia semiotic features. Multimedia is our conventional term for transmodal semiosis, for meaning effects that are produced by combinations of modalities, not media as such. Semiotic *modalities* are symbolic resource systems such as language (both speech and writing), visual depiction, gesture, bodily action, sound effects, music, etc. All of these can and do occur together in the same *medium* (the sound-film, videogames). A transmedia semiotics needs to understand what happens when meaning effects are created across different media, across different multimedia (i. e. multimodal) genres. A transmedia social semiotics needs to understand the role in this process of our participation in social networks and communities. It needs to extend as far as a political economy of the transmedia sign, in which we can take into account the effects on both sign production and sign use/interpretation of the profits of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) to the consumers and the profits pure and simple to the producers.

4. The Problem of Transmedia Signs

Strictly speaking, a sign cannot be replicated from one medium to another, nor a signifier from one modality to another. However a sign can be constituted by some interpreter as a relation between a signifier in one medium and a signified in another. We can imagine a chain of signification that connects an image of a character in a movie scene, to a passage of text describing such a scene, to our visualization of the character, ... to what? As usual in fictional universes, there is no determinate final object in the Peircean sense. It is clear that as readers we can build up a very determinate sense of Harry Potter, the character. (Might we even say, Harry Potter the person? or Harry the psychosocial persona?) We make such chains not just from one passage, but cumulatively across many passages of text. These passages cross-refer; they do not all refer to some single exophoric 'real' person. Similarly, cinematic scenes and corresponding textual passages from film to book cross-refer, and we build our sense of Harry Potter from the ways in which we construe transmedia meaning across them. We make them cross-refer, in the same sense that an interpreter determines which object some representamen signifies and in what respect (i.e. determines an interpretant). We don't need an ultimate signified, a real Harry, in order to coordinate the various meanings. Not only is there no real Harry, but there are also many possible (virtual? semiotic?) Harry's that can be constructed from the texts. Transmedia signs do not require anchorage in definite objects; they form systems of cross-reference which may be open or closed. Not merely the endless semiosis of Peirce (1998), but semiosis circulating in self-referential loops (cf. Baudrillard, 1994).

This initial example was a minimal one in that it starts from cinematic scenes and textual passages easily put in one-to-one correspondence by familiar principles. But what about the omnibus image or grand-synthesis identity we construct for Harry Potter himself? For some interpreters that may come only from textual passages, perhaps many of them, perhaps across books (having not seen the movies), or for others only from many film scenes. But for most it comes from both media, and it is in the strongest sense a transmedia meaning-effect. Many of us will also have played a *Harry Potter* computer or video game, in which we have ourselves animated Harry as a character and made action choices, and moral choices, in his boots.

We do not yet have models of intertextuality that conjoin multiple modalities of the sign as diverse as printed text and the interactive animation of videogame characters. If we look beyond the example of a transmedia character to the synthetic sense, let's say, of what it feels like to play Quidditch, the aerial soccer of Harry's universe, then that is certainly compounded from the cinematic, textual, and interactive-immersive experiences. How much more so for even more global meaning-effects such as the ethos or mythos of the Harry Potter world? The feeling we associate with Hogwarts Castle, our sense of what are appropriate moral choices for Harry? Even the taste of candy, not just described in text, or portrayed and reacted to on screen, but tasted (in some version) in a commodity we can actually buy and eat (<http://jellybelly.com/Cultures/en-US/OurCandy/BertieBottsEveryFlavorBeans/>) may well contribute to our comprehensive sense of Harry's world.

Apart from raising some potentially interesting basic semiotic issues here, I am leading us toward the question of what kinds of semiotic “features”, what kinds of signifiers, can participate in coherent transmedia meaning-effects? Imagine that the Harry Potter of one passage vs. another were very different characters. Or that the Harry Potter of the books and films were not recognizably the same persona? Clearly our interpretative practices can disjoin signifiers as well as conjoin them. We can declare that “that’s not Harry” as well as we can declare, or accept, or come to accept that it is. What does it take to transport Harry across media? Or to transport the ethos of his world across media?

This is not an entirely new issue. Re-semiotization or semiotic re-mediation (Iedema, 2003), for example between books and films, is well known. But equally this simplest case remains an unsolved problem. There is no clear formula for success in translating a novel to the screen, or vice versa. Despite countless examples and attempts, there are many failures and merely partial successes, and no persuasive analysis of what works or why, purely in terms of the transposition of signs. Perhaps there cannot be, because the outcome here is not determined by the signifiers themselves, but rather by what we interpreters are disposed to make of them.

We have some simple notions. Faithfulness to the book. Consistency in representations across media. Given a beloved fictional character from a novel, we ask that the film be faithful to our image, but a great director or a great actor will surprise us and succeed to some extent in *changing* our image of the character. We call that *art*, not faithfulness, and we value it more highly. Commercial transmedia in most instances fear a loss of value in translations, e.g. from successful film franchises like Star Wars to its many novelizations. They do not encourage and may strenuously oppose *art*. They do not want to risk losing ‘creative control’ of their highly profitable characters and storyworlds. As we will see below, the more successful their creations, the more inevitable this loss becomes.

Following the arguments of this chapter so far, we might say that what is needed for successful translation across media or genres is to appeal to identity dispositions and to shape them so as invite identification with new forms in the same spirit as identifications with prior forms. It is not so much that an actor “looks like” Harry Potter, as that he appeals to the same elements of our identity dispositions as does the textual representation of Potter as person, character, actant. Harry the victim, the orphan, the good-hearted, the loyal, the courageous, an everyman who is also unique and superior, but modest, etc. I am not attempting an analysis here of the appeal of Harry Potter, but rather a characterization of what might have passed in a more traditional analysis for the ultimate Signified that unites all successful representations of Potter.

I hope it is clear that I do not believe in such hieratic Signifieds (neither in fictional universes nor in any others). Rather I am arguing that what the successful signifiers have in common is the dispositions in us, in our identities, that they appeal to. It is to ourselves that we have to look for the basis of co-identifications with different cross-media presentations (not *re*-presentations) of Harry, or of any other transmedia meaning effect. In one version of the Peircean triad, it is the three-way relations among

signifier, object, and interpretants that determine meaning: the ways in which some interpreting system is disposed to make a connection between a signifier and what it signifies. I am arguing here that transmedia connections are due not so much to faithfulness to a common signified (not even as a common meaning, much less a common reality) as to a consonance of appeals to interpretive dispositions.

So it is to the ways in which our dispositions toward Harry have themselves been shaped by franchised (and other) media that we must look to understand transmedia meaning effects. The secret of successful transmedia franchises or complexes is that they make us into ideal transmedia consumers, ones who will in fact construe satisfying transmedia meanings across these media presentations of universes that are ‘the same’ only insofar as we construe them as being the same.

This is a reciprocal relationship. The media are shaping us, and we are determining what shapes the media must take to do so. Agency here is distributed over vast networks of producers, marketers, consumer/interpreters, and media themselves. As in any such complex dynamical system, new qualitative phenomena are emergent, whether they are new social identities, new cultural imaginative-worlds, or new marketing strategies such as transmedia franchises.

5. Social networking and transmedia

Transmedia franchises do not represent by any means the whole extent of the relevant transmedia complex. All the popular franchise ‘worlds’ have many associated websites and online communities. Some of these are owned and managed by the franchisees: the producers and publishers of films, games, television programs, and less often books and merchandise. Many more are initiated and run by communities of fans, not for profit. These are unofficial, unauthorized, un-licensed. Un-franchised. The fan communities are indeed often at odds with the franchisees, or at least in an uneasy symbiotic relationship with them (Jenkins, 2006a).

Fans use the online discussion forums of their websites to discuss the works within the franchise, sometimes critically, and also to meet one another and make friends. Historically, many of these communities grew out of informal social networks of people who wrote their own amateur fiction within the mythos of their favorite franchise worlds. One genre of such fiction, written by women, portrayed two male characters from the mythos in romantic relationships with each other (in the West, “slash fiction”, in Japan, “yaoi”). While women seem to understand the appeal of such fantasies, the men in charge of the franchises often do not and they have objected, legalistically, to the publication (itself a blurred category today) of such work. The internet websites may support this particular genre or not, but they do support extensive writing of many kinds and today also the creation of videos set in the mythos of the franchise. A franchise which is now, we see, no longer entirely a ‘franchise’. In many cases, perhaps most, these wider transmedia complexes have grown beyond the control of their originators and legal heirs or ‘owners’. Many of these mythos worlds have already passed into folk culture. (Legally, this might void the owners’ intellectual property rights, worth billions, and so they are

obliged by current law to ‘actively defend’ their rights, sometimes by the absurd harassment of under-age amateur writers exercising their freedom of expression.)

When author J.K. Rowling announced definitively on her website that Harry Potter had no romantic interest in schoolmate Hermione Granger, legions of fans invested in this imaginative possibility denounced her and insisted on their own claims to authority in the matter. There are many such cases with fans of television series as well, rejecting the producers’ or writers’ authority to say what ought to happen in the fictional world (Jenkins, 2006a). Rowling is encouraging of most fan fiction set in the Potterverse, but uneasy about the slash genre, and objects to actually pornographic use of her characters. Thousands of fan works and hundred of thousands of fan readers, however, politely ignore her views (which in Japan, for instance, have no legal enforceability with respect to amateur production; there are thousands of published and popular *Harry Potter* “yaoi” graphic novels).

In the domain of computer and video games, amateur networks of artists, writers, designers, and programmers have produced ‘modifications’ or ‘mods’ of famous games, which have then in some cases been bought by commercial interests and added to the official franchises. For example the very popular game franchise *Half-Life* has around 300 such amateur mods, (<http://games.moddb.com/1/half-life/mods/>), many of which also change the mythos, sometimes leading to the creation of a new franchise, as in the case of *Counterstrike*, a modern war-game series produced from the futuristic fantasy world of the original *Half-Life*; (<http://mods.moddb.com/37/counter-strike/>). Of these 300 only a few have been commercialized, but many are regularly downloaded and played by tens of thousands. Recognizing the potential for user-made content on many scales (from whole game mods to new characters, scenes, or in-world objects), many franchises invite fans to produce and share content (as in *The Sims* franchise, simulation games of daily life and social relationships, <http://thesims.ea.com/>), and even provide free, sophisticated computer tools for ‘modding’ their games, sold with the game itself (e.g. the *Neverwinter Nights* or *Elder Scrolls* franchises, and many more).

It is not just in terms of production or legal control that transmedia today expand beyond the domain of the official franchise. It is also in matters of interpretation and reception, where individual fans turn to the online communities for guidance. Many of these ‘worlds’ are so vastly complex, with voluminous and detailed

Some immersive online worlds where players evolve the content of the transmedia mythos. Subscriber numbers may change quickly; 100,000s are typical

- | | |
|--|---|
| (a) World of Warcraft: 8 million subscribers | (f) Guildwars: 3 million subscribers |
| (b) The Sims Online | (g) SecondLife (non-game) |
| (c) Star Wars Galaxies | (h) Final Fantasy XI |
| (d) Everquest II | (i) America’s Army: 8 million registered users |
| (e) Lineage I & II: 1 to 2 million subscribers each | (non-game) |

Table 5: Persistent Virtual Worlds (MMOs)

histories and mythologies of their own, with their own laws of science and magic, with multitudes of characters, political alliances, social classes, industries, economics, etc., etc. that fans may as well be studying the natural and social history, geography, and sociology of other planets (as they often imagine that they are). Increasingly these worlds are now also 'living' worlds, in which participants, not franchise owners, are writing the history and evolving the mythos. (Legally, and rather dubiously, the franchise owners usually try to assert a property right over everything that is done or made within these worlds.) A profound conflict is building between the economic imperatives to own and profit from imaginative worlds and the sense of ownership by right of creation and identification on the part of millions of participants in these worlds.

These fan participants are organized. They are organized primarily to assist in their interpretation of and potential contribution to the transmedia complexes. These complexes must now be defined beyond the official franchises to include the aggregate production of the fan communities themselves (Black, 2006). Their combination of social networking and joint interpretation and production in fact gives many of these communities an advantage even over academic scholars in the analysis of transmedia. Increasingly scholars are joining these communities to learn from them, as well as to use their productions as data (Steinkuehler, Black, Clinton, 2005; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b). It is quite possible that the larger transmedia complexes have already grown beyond the capacity of individual scholars to cogently analyze them, e.g. in ways that would be respected by sophisticated members of the fan community (a similar criterion to that of 'member checking' in anthropology and sociology). It may well take communities of scholars, working together, as well as in conjunction with the fan communities, to truly take stock of transmedia phenomena.

How does participation in a social network of other people with extensive knowledge of a transmedia complex mediate individual identifications, interpretations, evaluations, and responsive or counter-productions? This is, I believe, a key question today for multimodal semiotic analysis of some of the most important kinds of media in our society. It may suggest a model for all socially significant media analysis in the future.

6. Transmedia, traversals, and social networks

How then should we begin to conceptualize all these phenomena together: traversals, transmedia, identity markets, and mediation by social networks? Our aim all along has been to explore the changing political economy of the sign (Baudrillard, 1988). In the fantasies of Power, and often enough in practical fact, the appeal of a transmedia mythos (its characters, dramas, values, and proffered identifications) invites prospective consumers (and voters) to form strong identifications with its key elements, and above all with the implicit principles of differentiation and hierarchization of identities which will work to create and expand markets defined by particular identity types. These may be, as Bourdieu (1984) has so elegantly shown, not just markets and dispositional preferences for films or magazines, but also for news media, politicians, rhetorics, and policies.

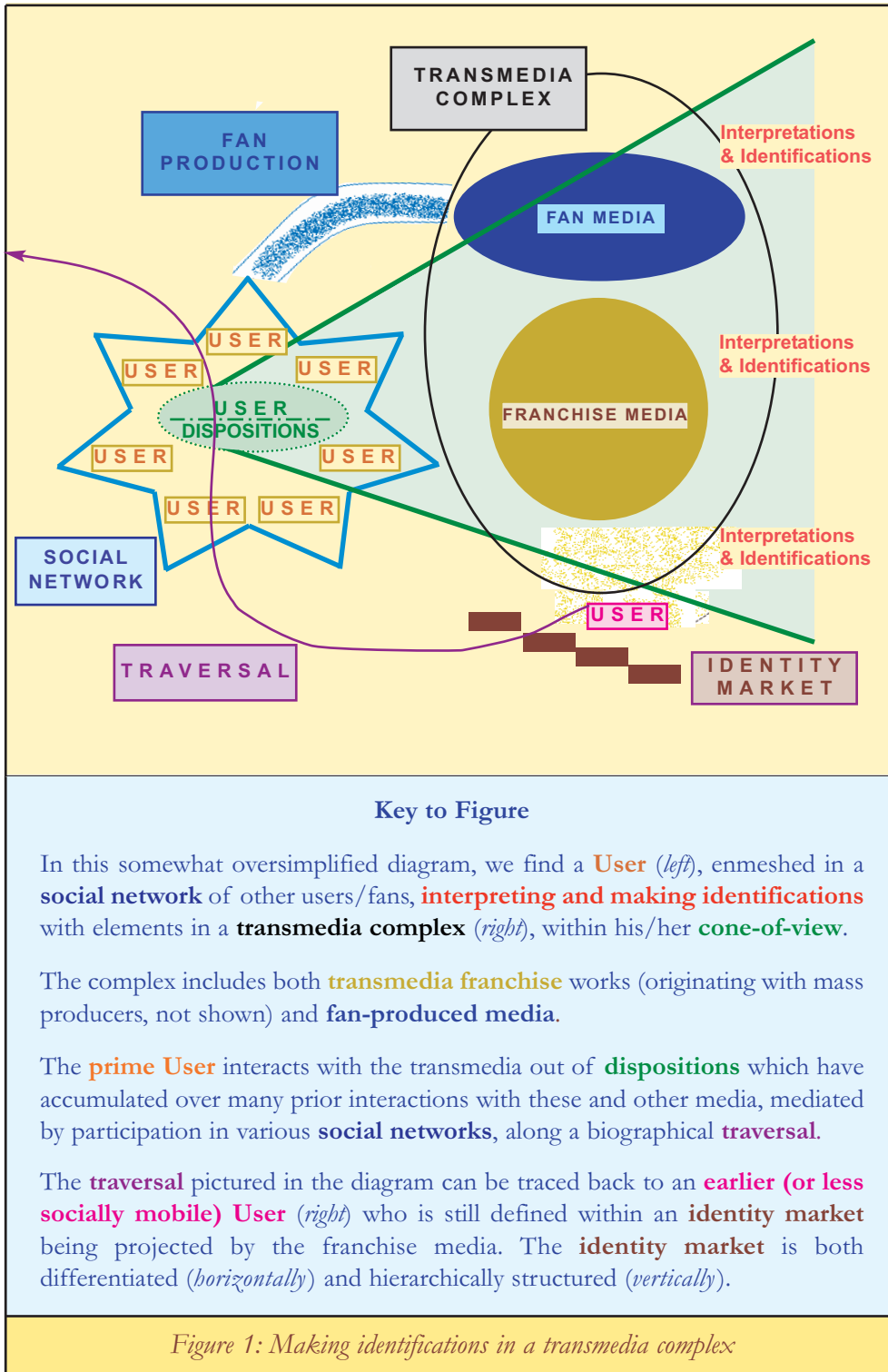
Into this perfectly regulated world of transmedia and identity markets comes a somewhat unexpected phenomenon: internet-mediated, broadly accessible, large-scale

social networks in which consumers discuss, critique, cannibalize, and re-appropriate the content of transmedia franchises, while adding to the total transmedia complex their own productions. Consumers are now also producers or at least participants in networks that are creating interpretations of transmedia potentially (and in such complex meaning spaces, almost inevitably) at odds with those of the official producers and managers of the franchise. These expanding and mutually interacting networks now operate on an extended complex, combining old and new official additions to the franchise with the large contribution of fan production, re-interpretation, and critique. What is judged authentic to the mythos edges out of the control of the official producers and into the control of the consensus of expert consumers. Newcomers turn to the communities for social reciprocity and a sense of genuine participation, and they find far more interpretive assistance than comes from the producers. They do so just as the franchises are growing beyond the bounds of individual interpretive capacity, while still retaining, and perhaps even strengthening their appeal.

Our identities arise in large part, and certainly insofar as they can contribute to social solidarities, though our identifications with beliefs, values, ideals, groups and communities, and increasingly, under the influence of mass media and consumer marketing, with our choices in consumer markets and our preferences in media. We are a society in which consumer values and the ideals of life depicted in marketing messages have few effective competitors on a mass scale. For most young people today, neither politics, nor religion, nor education offer very appealing identifications. They are too transparently corrupt, bankrupt. Consumer materialism steps in to define success, to define popularity, to define what is worth having and doing. Along with goods and services, it sells us values, and more implicitly the principles of social differentiation and hierarchization that favor its interests.

Now, however, there is a new counter-weight. Online communities and social networks are not merely sites for exchanges of information. They are also sites for experimentation with identities. Whether we try on identification with a dangerous killer, a soldier for justice, a good-hearted thief, a wicked wizard, a commander of battalions, a builder of cities, or a leader of civilization (all pervasive themes of video and computer games), we find it convenient and perhaps necessary to also participate in communities where we figure out how to play these roles more successfully, where we discuss our exploits with peers and amateur experts, and where we develop identities both for our fantasy personas and for our community personas.

We identify not just with characters or goals, but with interpretations of those characters and goals. Our interpretations are increasingly shaped by our participation in social networks, and the dominant interpretations available in those networks are products not just of the official media, but also of the history of productions by fans of the extended, more total transmedia complex. As we find ourselves more and more identifying with and playing out the consequences of alternative roles and interpretations, inevitable conflicts and contradictions will arise, and inevitable spaces of alternative possibilities will emerge. No one will control the identity consequences of transmedia, when our experience of them is mediated by large, diverse social networks.



I attempt to sketch some of these relationships in [Figure 1 on the facing page](#). It shows the user (fan, reader, viewer, participant, player) interacting with, interpreting, and in many cases identifying with semiotic elements in a transmedia complex. The user does so from within a peer social network of other users, who mediate the interaction with the transmedia complex. That interaction is guided not only by the advice and consensus of the network (often in fact more than one such network), but also by the user's own dispositions, sedimented from many prior interactions with these and other media and social networks. The transmedia complex itself consists of not only the official franchise media, but also the substantial body of fan-produced media, and the user encounters these very much as two parts of a single transmedia system. The user lies at some point along a life-trajectory which, as a traversal, crosses many sites, media, and networks. As shown in Figure 1, at some time past, the user may have been bound into identifications projected by the franchise media that tended to locate him/her in a particular position within a differentiated and hierarchized identity market. The boundary-crossing nature of the traversal, and the influences of the diverse peer social networks encountered along the way potentially allow the user to re-appropriate the identifications and resources of the identity market and its franchise media, so as to ground an identity less constrained by the interests of the mass producers of the franchise media.

The political economy of the sign has most often been envisioned as a determination of the symbolic realm by the interests of material production and profit, whether in the traditional model of base and superstructure, the successor models of ideological hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Althusser, 1971), or conceptualizations of the domination of the fields of symbolic production by their coupling to the field of financial production (Bourdieu, 1990). Baudrillard (1988) criticized these models for their unbalanced emphasis on production over consumption, calling for more attention to consumption and its subversive potential, as well as more attention to the increasing dependence of capital on marketing, rather than primary productivity, to make its profits.

Against the arguments for structural determination, the defense of free-will has frequently fallen back to the bastion of hermeneutics: we can still interpret as we will. Mass media, however, have made increasingly good use of multimodality, of the richness of meanings even within a realist interpretive frame, to pull more and more people into conformity with the dominant model of identity markets, differential identifications, and targeted consumption. If there was diversity of interpretation of mass media, it was still by and large within the canonical system of identities and identifications. We interpreted from our subject positions, as Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated, and our subject positions were created and reinforced by the options offered us in the consumer markets. We still are, to a very large degree that perhaps none of us wish to admit, what we buy. Consumer goods, including media, are signs indeed – signs of our social position, our taste, our wealth, our choice from among the identities on offer in the market. The use-value of most consumer goods today would not garner the prices these goods command on the market; it is their sign-values we are paying for. It is not for naught that in many of the most competitive consumer goods industries today, more is spent on marketing than on production.

So what happens when this neat hegemonic arrangement is interrupted by the intervention of new social networks in the media consumption process? When consumers come to demand, and profitability is maximized, not just by multimedia but by transmedia so increasingly complex that they must be consumed with the assistance of social networks that also transform their specific sign-effects so far as our identifications are concerned?

I believe that we are on the cusp of a new political economy of the sign. It will continue to be the case that sign-value adds more than does use-value to the exchange-value of consumer products and services. It will continue to be the case that economic flows will follow identities and identifications. But marketing and mass media will lose their ability to determine identity markets. Identities and identifications will become more fragmented, localized, and strung together along our traversals across different sites and social networks. Media production will divide into a small number of mass-circulation cultural icons and an enormous number of locally appealing and increasingly complex productions by social networks themselves. Locally appealing to online communities, to people who share some history of membership, though surely many such communities will be transient and relatively few may persist over longer timescales.

Our lives will continue to be lived along boundary-crossing traversals: across genres, across media, across physical places and virtual spaces, across institutions and careers. Each of us will become a relatively unique accumulator of diversity of experience by virtue of our particular traversals, and this will be the coin of value that we trade in multiple online communities. The identity markets proposed by mass producers in the consumer economy will be for us merely one more identity resource, and not the only available identity options. The ideological effects defined by the principles of differentiation and hierarchization in those identity markets and embedded in the media which propagate them will be filtered and transformed through our social networks and re-appropriated for our own and our communities' purposes. The diversity of interpretive perspectives and resources across our networks will tend to insure that few embedded naturalizations will survive intact.

What does this mean for the academic analysis of multimodality? I believe first of all that it means we need to greatly elaborate our conceptual apparatus for understanding how meanings can be made across not just different semiotic modalities, but across different media and different multimodal genres. Secondly, it means that we need to expand our view of the sign systems that contribute to multimodal media to include action and interaction by users and producers, and to include material artifacts which co-circulate with other media, as consumer merchandise does in the transmedia complexes. Finally, while it remains analytically useful to separate the media from the users, we need to explore in great detail just how interpretation and use of multimedia and transmedia are mediated by social networks, especially by peer production. So far as the individual user is concerned, social networks are now effectively part of the transmedia complexes: they are a critically important meaning-making resource that touches on and helps us to integrate meanings made with all the others. The power and control over identity dispositions formerly held by global producers and expressed through the shaping of identity markets is now passing to extended social networks. The meaning effects of multimodal signs will increasingly be determined by the forms of our participation in these networks.

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