Transmedia world-building: The Shadow (1931–present) and Transformers (1984–present)

Karin Fast
Karlstad University, Sweden

Henrik Örnebring
Karlstad University, Sweden

Abstract
The study of transmedia storytelling has in recent years turned towards a more historicized understanding of its object of study, and also shifted to a wider perspective on narrative and narrative elements, focusing more on the transmediality of story-worlds and world-building rather than just narratives ('plots') in the stricter sense. This article combines these interrelated perspectival shifts in an analysis of story-worlds/world-building in two transmedia franchises: The Shadow (1931–present) and Transformers (1984–present), with a focus on the mechanics and processes of world-building in relation to transmedial change (i.e. how world elements are transformed over time as well as when story-worlds move across media platforms).

Keywords
The Shadow, story-worlds, Transformers, transmedia history, transmedia storytelling, world-building

Transmedia worlds and histories
The study of transmediality, and transmedia narratives and storytelling in particular, has in recent years turned towards a more historicized understanding of its object of study.
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(Freeman, 2014a, 2014b; Jenkins, 2014; Kelleter, 2012; Klinger, 2014; Scolari et al., 2014; Staiger and Hake, 2009). The field has also shifted to a wider perspective on narrative and narrative elements, focusing more on the transmediality of story worlds and world-building rather than the transmediality of narratives (‘plots’) in the stricter sense (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009; Hills, 2012; Jenkins, 2013; Johnson, 2009a; Saler, 2012; Scolari, 2009; Wolf, 2012; Örnebring, 2007). This article combines these interrelated perspectival shifts in an analysis of story worlds/world-building in two transmedia franchises: The Shadow (1931–present) and Transformers (1984–present), looking at the details of world-building, the changes/disjunctions created when story worlds move between media platforms, and the balance between emergent (i.e. unplanned, contingent, organic) and planned (i.e. strategic, coordinated) aspects of transmedial entertainment.

Several studies of transmedia entertainment and transmedia narratives emphasize the planned, strategic aspects of their creation: media companies carefully structuring and portioning the narrative across different media platforms in order to maximize synergistic effects. The early definition of transmedia storytelling proposed by Jenkins (2003) holds that it is a particularly thrilling type of entertainment where ‘each medium does what it does best’. Jenkins’ account of the Matrix universe likewise focuses on the seamless extension of world and narrative through different media platforms, where fan enjoyment of the Matrix universe derives from an intricate but ultimately graspable narrative puzzle whose pieces fit together across media platforms (Jenkins, 2006: 93). The coordinated nature of transmedia storytelling is further underscored in Jenkins (2011) when the phenomenon is described as: ‘a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience’. This view of transmedia entertainment as the results of carefully orchestrated company strategies is also present in many other works, often based on a political economy perspective (Caldwell, 2006; Meehan, 1991; Murray, 2003, 2005; Proffitt et al., 2007; Wasko, 1994, 2001).

This view can be contrasted with more recent works and thought on transmedia narratives (including those of Jenkins himself, see following section), which rather emphasize the many disjunctions and contradictions that almost inevitably follow when extending/transferring/adapting transmedia worlds across/between media, particularly in a context of increased blurring of the consumer/producer distinction, where fan-produced transmedial material exists alongside officially sanctioned industry texts. Here, the focus is on the emergent (as opposed to planned) nature of the narrative aspects of transmediality. This perspective is linked to the aforementioned shift to the analysis of story worlds rather than narratives in the strict sense. Many transmedia worlds have been created over many years, by many people (industry-employed, fans, and/or fans-turned-industry-employed) and therefore have (a) accrued characteristics that are more ad hoc/contingent than planned; and/or (b) contain disjunctions and contradictions that are actually the result of strategic planning decisions (i.e. strategic planning of transmedia worlds is not necessarily focused on creating a seamless, coherent world). The following section summarizes some of the key research on story worlds, world-building and transmediality, with a particular focus on the emergent, organic (and therefore often problematic from an industry point of view) characteristics of these phenomena.
Conceptualizing transmediality: history, worlds and world-building

When a story is extended from one platform to another, or repeated as with adaptations, textual elements other than the story (‘plot’) must also be brought over to the new platform. Wolf (2012) and others thus link transmediality to *imaginary worlds* and *world-building*. The characteristics of ‘world aesthetics’ and ‘world logic’ must accompany the narrative across platforms, in order for the fictional world to remain familiar to the audience (Wolf, 2012: 246). Not only plot threads but also visual elements, characters and/or objects need to move across media platforms. Klastrup and Tosca (2004) use the term ‘transmedial worlds’ to describe media properties where ‘audience and designers share a mental image of the “worldness” (a number of distinguishing features of its universe)’ (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004: np).

The importance of ‘worldness’ to certain categories of media texts, notably those that develop ‘cult’ status and active fandoms, is well known: Eco, for example, argues that in order for texts to become ‘cult’, they need to ‘provide a completely furnished world’ (Eco, 1995: 198) about which fans can establish a shared expertise. Gwenllian Jones (2000: 12, 2004), in contrast, points to the importance of the ‘unfurnished’ nature of expansive story worlds, so that fans themselves can fill in/speculate about details of that world. A similar notion is also expressed by Hills when he introduces the term *hyperdiegetic* (applied to TV story worlds in particular) to describe the fact that only a fraction of the ‘world’ may be shown on the screen but the world is implied to exist and have a history as well as future continuity independent of the part that is shown (Hills, 2002). Eco and Gwenllian Jones/Hills may differ in their view of the ‘completeness’ of the story world, but the basic argument that it is the vastness and expanse of the world itself that contributes to cult status remains similar. Likewise, Hills also links hyperdiegetic characteristics to transmediality in his writings (Hills, 2002, 2008); the interrelated lattice of texts across different media platforms is a key vehicle of hyperdiegesis. The close link between transmediality and hyperdiegesis (understood as an expansive, only part-visible, back-story or ‘world’) – has also been demonstrated by other scholars (e.g. Bourdée, 2013; Jess-Cooke, 2012: 85; Johnson 2009a: 37).

The creation of thickly described, detailed transmedial worlds is of course not a new phenomenon and many transmedia ‘properties’ have in fact grown organically over periods of several decades – and a transmedia world is not necessarily ‘finished’ when the ‘original’ creator dies, either. In his book on the literary prehistory of world creation (or ‘virtual reality’ as he terms it), Saler uses the cases of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and H.P. Lovecraft’s so-called Cthulhu Mythos stories to illustrate the importance of the interplay between ‘original’ authors, readers/fans, and later authors contributing to the narrative world (Saler, 2012). Tolkien and Lovecraft in particular were explicitly engaged in world-building (Tolkien termed the activity ‘subcreation’, a term later borrowed by Wolf, 2012), and many other writers have also published works reflecting on, or attempting to guide other presumptive authors in, the process of world creation (e.g. Anderson and Gillett, 1991; Carter, 1973). The works of Saler, Wolf and others link the ‘historical turn’ and the ‘world-building
The turn to history and world-building has also meant a more explicit recognition that contradictions, disjunctions and transformations are as much a part of transmedial storytelling as planning, coordination and strategy. In a keynote address from 2013 (also referenced earlier), Jenkins develops and elaborates his definition of transmedia storytelling from *Convergence Culture* to be much less strict and much more oriented towards creation processes that encompass contradictions as well as coordination (Jenkins, 2013: 7:05 onwards, 29:20 onwards, for example; see also Ford and Jenkins, 2009). Hills’ work on the sometimes conflictual relationships between fans and the media industry in transmedia story world creation is also an example of work moving in this direction (Hills, 2012), as is Johnson’s work on the vagaries of Marvel’s *X-Men* franchise (Johnson, 2009b). In fact, the works of Johnson (2009b) and Jenkins (2013) share an important focus on transmediality as a *process* rather than an *end result*; transmedia storytelling – particularly world-building – rarely ‘ends’, as demonstrated by the often fan-driven continuance of certain story worlds (e.g. Saler, 2012 and Wolf, 2012 on Tolkien’s Middle-Earth; Hills, 2008, 2009 on *Doctor Who*).

**Issues for analysis**

Even as the study of transmedia storytelling has become more historicized and based on a wider definition of ‘storytelling’, there is still much detail that remains to be added regarding how, exactly, transmedial worlds are built up (or torn down!) over time, and how they change when worlds move across media platforms. Wolf identifies two ways in which a story world can become transmedial; one is adaptation (which strictly speaking just moves the world to a new medium but does not add to it), the other is ‘world growth’ (i.e. ‘when another medium is used to present new canonical material of a world, expanding the world and what we know about it’) [Wolf, 2012: 247]). Wolf points out that both adaptations and growth assume pre-existing material that is being extended or modified in some way, and reminds us that the move of a story from one platform to another by necessity involves change. Apart from the changes that must come due to the specific characteristics of different media (e.g. with the move from book to film), narratives might also be changed due to other circumstances, such as budget considerations or commercial ambitions (e.g. the adding of romance or sex to a story to attract a wider audience).

In addition to this, studies of transmedia storytelling linking historical analysis and world-building also need a much greater level of empirical detail on exactly how ‘world-building’ works in practice. What are the key elements of a particular world? Characters? Settings? Objects? Serial plots/story arcs? Look and feel? Compare, for example H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, where his and others’ stories share settings and an overarching mythology, but rarely characters, with Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, which has an elaborate history, creation myth, characters, and even its own languages. And what is the
relationship between ‘original’ world elements and elements added later (possibly by new creators or audience members)? What elements are deemed essential by producers, by audiences? Etcetera.

Taking a historical perspective, we look comparatively at two transmedia properties from different time periods: adventure hero The Shadow as a typical example of early 20th-century pulp transmedia entertainment, and toy-based franchise Transformers as an example of the contemporary paradigm of transmedia entertainment. The particular analytical focus is the transformative impact that transmedia production/consumption has on narrative worlds, and on the relative balance between planning and contingency at different points of the history of a franchise.

The cases: sources and empirical material

Scholarly work on The Shadow and pulp magazines in general is scarce. Smith’s (2000) study stands out as an exception, even though it deals mainly with Black Mask Magazine rather than The Shadow. Anderson’s (2006) PhD dissertation on the earlier history of Street & Smith has also been useful. Some but not all of the 325 The Shadow pulp novels have been reprinted; a few of the radio shows are available in mp3 format and in some cases scripts have been preserved. In describing this particular case we also rely on more popular/fannish histories of the pulp magazines and the pulp era, such as Goulart (1972), Hutchison (1998), Murray (1980) and Severin and Holt (1995), as well as Shadow author Walter B. Gibson’s own The Shadow Scrapbook (Gibson, 1979).

Transformers has attracted somewhat more scholarly attention, although often as one example/case out of several (e.g. as an example of contemporary franchising in Clark, 2007, or of children’s culture in Fleming, 1996). Johnson’s (2013) work on the brand is especially valuable in that it contributes an updated description and analysis of the franchise. The presentation of Transformers in this article rests on material (interviews and text analyses) and findings published in an earlier work by one of the authors (Fast, 2012). The focus of this article is the franchise texts related to the live-action film franchise, starting with the release of Michael Bay’s blockbuster adventure Transformers (2007). The narratives of these texts, including, for example, comic book adaptations and extensions, electronic games and an animated TV show, are viewed in the light of the original Transformers narrative, as established primarily through the comic books, cartoons and toy packages in the 1980s.

Each case study begins with a brief description of the property and its history, followed by a three-part analysis that first discusses the transmedial strategies used in the creation of the property (including information on the audience context), second, analyses the story world changes caused by the ‘transmediatization’ of the property and, third, summarizes the extent and nature of story world creation in relation to the property.

The Shadow: a brief presentation

The fictional transmedia character The Shadow is a masked crime fighter, sometimes portrayed as possessing the supernatural power to become invisible by ‘clouding men’s minds’. In 1930, pulp publishing company Street & Smith hired an advertising agency
and a director to develop stories from their weekly Detective Story Magazine into a radio show. The radio show, Detective Story Hour, had an announcer character called The Shadow who became unexpectedly popular. Street & Smith quickly capitalized on this popularity and commissioned writer Walter B. Gibson to develop The Shadow as a character and to write stories about this character for Detective Story Magazine. Gibson’s first novel-length story (published under the pen name Maxwell Grant) about The Shadow was published on 1 April 1931, and in 1937 The Shadow radio series was reworked in order to more closely resemble Gibson’s version of the character.1 The radio series ran from 1937 to 1954 and Shadow stories were a feature of The Shadow magazine (i.e. the re-christened Detective Story Magazine) until it ceased publication in 1949 (Gibson, 1979; Goulart, 1972; Murray, 1980).

The Shadow was a true transmedia property. Besides pulp magazines and radio, the character also appeared in short films, feature films and a film series, in comics (comic books and syndicated newspaper strips), and there were two aborted attempts to develop The Shadow as a TV series, the latter of which resulted in the 1958 theatrical release of The Invisible Avenger, in reality two pilot TV episodes edited into a feature-length movie (Murray, 1980: 56). Post-1954 the main platform for The Shadow has been comics, with different comic versions being published in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and most recently in 2012. The heyday of The Shadow was the 1930s and 1940s, when fans could also consume various tie-ins and licensed products such as Shadow masks, rings and other toys (Gibson, 1979: 156; Hutchison, 1998: 45).

The publishing house behind The Shadow, Street & Smith (Street & Smith Publications, Inc.) in fact had over 50 years of experience (in 1931) with ‘transmedia’ entertainment across a range of print products. Founded in 1855, the publisher had first specialized in so-called dime novels and then expanded into pulp magazines, comic books, sports magazines/yearbooks, regular paperbacks, cloth-bound novels and popular history books (Anderson, 2006: 47f). Street & Smith, like its pulp publishing competitors (Popular Publications, Munsey’s, Dell, and others), was both horizontally and vertically integrated (Smith, 2000: 51) – the company also had interests in distribution, for example. Street & Smith regularly organized ‘plot contests’ in their pulp magazines and sought feedback from retailers, all in order to find out more about audience preferences (Anderson, 2006: 59, 74). Production followed a ‘batch-production’ model where texts were re-used across many different print outlets, and where magazines and other publications were routinely used to market other products from the same publishing house (Anderson, 2006: 65ff). Sponsoring a radio show was originally conceived of as a one-way strategy to promote Detective Story Magazine (and to transfer the ‘batch-production’ model to radio through the re-use and adaptation of magazine stories into radio scripts), but when the radio show became popular with a mass audience, Street & Smith set about changing the pulp version of the character to more closely resemble the radio version, changing elements of the narrative world.

Since adventure pulps were aimed mainly at a (male) working-class audience (Smith, 2000: 3f, 16f) they were not deemed suitable venues for brand advertising but did contain cross-promotional advertising for other products, textual or otherwise, from the same publishing house – in fact, pulps were largely ad-free as they relied on audience sales as their main revenue stream (Anderson, 2006: 65; Smith, 2000: 49f). Radio, on the
other hand, was from the outset conceived of as medium driven by mass advertising for a mass audience (Hilmes, 1997).

**The Shadow story world from print to radio to film, from niche to mass audience**

*The Shadow*’s narrative world with various recurring features emerged gradually in the period 1931–7, driven by a combination of Street & Smith strategies and the efforts of writer Walter B. Gibson, who is generally considered the inventor of The Shadow as a pulp character (Goulart, 1972; Murray, 1980). It was only when Gibson was given the task of developing the character for the pulp magazine that the story world began to take form.

The character itself was in fact not very clearly defined during the early pulp years. In many of the early novels (1931–4), The Shadow is not necessarily the protagonist but instead appears as a nebulous head of a crime-fighting network who only occasionally involves himself directly in said crime-fighting (Murray, 1980: 16–18, 23). In the second novel (*The Eyes of the Shadow*, 1931), The Shadow’s alter ego Lamont Cranston (a globe-trotting New Jersey millionaire) is introduced, but it is also made clear that The Shadow is merely ‘borrowing’ Cranston’s identity while the latter is on an extended stay abroad, with the consent of Cranston (Severin and Holt, 1995: 4). The Shadow’s own real name is not revealed until much later (in *The Shadow Unmasks*, 1937): he is former First World War aviator Kent Allard, who decides to become a masked crime fighter. In order to more easily assume several identities, he fakes his own death in the jungle of South America and returns to New York where he becomes The Shadow.

Besides the character itself, other key elements of the pulp Shadow story world were (a) The Shadow’s allies, (b) his recurring aliases and disguises, (c) a number of recurring locations, (d) the technical/special equipment used by The Shadow, and (e) his colourful enemies.

The Shadow was not alone in his fight against crime but relied on a secret organization consisting of many allies: members Harry Vincent, Rutledge Mann, Burbank (no first name given), Chinatown ally Yat Soon, hard-nosed New York cop Joe Cardona, crafty cab driver Moe Shrevnitz, and police commissioner Weston (many more allies would appear in only one or a few books, never to return) are all introduced over the course of the first 30–40 novels (published 1931–3). The Shadow also had several other recurring aliases besides the Cranston persona, such as Fritz, the police headquarters janitor, millionaire criminologist George Clarendon, businessman Henry Arnaud, and elderly collector Phineas Twambly. Even though The Shadow would eventually be active all over the world, New York (Chinatown in particular) was central to the story world, with recurring locations like gentlemen’s club Cobalt Club (of which Lamont Cranston and police commissioner Weston are both members) and the nondescript B. Jonas office, which functions as a message drop location for The Shadow’s agents and houses radio operating ally Burbank.

Prefiguring Batman’s utility belt, The Shadow makes use of various fantastic technologies in his fight against crime, notably suction cups that allow him to scale walls, an autogyro (one-man helicopter), and a mask that makes him appear featureless (Murray,
As to enemies, Diamond Bert Farwell (sometimes Diamond Bert Farley) appears in the very first novel (The Living Shadow, 1931) and returns to vex The Shadow many more times; Oriental mastermind (and descendant of Genghis Khan) Shiwan Khan, appears in several novels starting with The Golden Master (1939).

When The Shadow was transferred to radio with the reworked radio show in 1937, several elements of the established pulp story world were reworked to fit the new medium and its wider audience. First, the notion that The Shadow operated under a number of guises and used several aliases was deemed too complex for a mass audience, and also something that was difficult to get across in the medium of broadcast radio (Severin and Holt, 1995: 4). Therefore, in the radio show, The Shadow simply was Lamont Cranston, wealthy man-about-town. Second, while Cranston would occasionally use disguises, his main feature was a supernatural power: the power to ‘cloud men’s minds’, rendering him invisible by hypnotizing those around him. This was of course an invention that specifically took into account the limitations and possibilities of the radio medium, a narrative conceit that explained how it was possible that The Shadow could constantly eavesdrop on the villains and their allies. Third, the radio show also introduced a female lead character, socialite Margot (later Margo) Lane, The Shadow’s foremost friend and companion (Murray, 1980: 34). Thus the narrative world of the radio Shadow was not-so-subtly different from the pulp magazine version: the radio Shadow had a different alias, supernatural powers, a female ally, and less complex methods and aliases than those used by the pulp version – all changes brought about specifically because of differences between the respective media (i.e. textual/aural, niche/mass audience).

The pulp novels hardly featured women at all in the early years – only one of the many Shadow allies invented by Gibson was female (FBI agent Myra Reldon, introduced in The Teeth of the Dragon, 1937; Murray, 1980: 33; Severin and Holt, 1995: 5); in fact it was not Gibson but replacement author Theodore Tinsley who started using more female characters in the pulps (mostly to add a risqué/sexual tension element), starting in Partners of Peril (1936) (Murray, 1980: 30). Gibson was himself reluctant to introduce Margo Lane as a character to the pulps but eventually (in The Thunder King, 1941) had to do it as it was a demand from the publisher (Murray, 1980: 41; Severin and Holt, 1995: 5). The migration of Margo Lane from radio and into the pulps breaks the otherwise fairly clear separation of pulp and radio narrative worlds.

Interestingly, the supernatural power to cloud men’s minds never fully migrated into the pulps but remained a feature only of the radio Shadow. In the pulp version, The Shadow had a ‘mild’ version of hypnotic powers, and Gibson subtly poked fun at the more powerful radio version of these powers in several novels and tried to get out of changing this particular aspect of the character to more closely resemble the radio version (Murray, 1980: 43). And when the transmediality of The Shadow was expanded through a movie serial in 1940 (starring Victor Jory as the titular character), it was the villain, the Black Tiger, who had the power to turn invisible, rather than The Shadow (in the first two feature films about The Shadow, made in 1937 and 1938, Lamont Cranston/The Shadow possesses no supernatural powers).

It was in fact not until the pulp/radio period of The Shadow as transmedia narrative was over that these disjunctions were resolved, in comic form. The 1973–5 DC Comics version of The Shadow, written by Denis O’Neil and illustrated by Michael Kaluta, integrated the
separate story worlds of the pulp and radio Shadow (Severin, 1995: 8). In this version, The Shadow was assisted by Margo Lane as well as several of his pulp helpers; he had the power to cloud men’s minds, but his alias was Kent Allard, not Lamont Cranston, thus merging many of the disparate world elements (Severin, 1995: 8). It was likely this comic version of The Shadow that was the main inspiration for The Shadow movie from 1994, as this movie also merged pulp/radio story elements in a similar fashion.

The ‘worldness’ of The Shadow

The pulp magazine version of The Shadow existed in a rich narrative world of recurring multiple aliases, allies, locations and villains. Only some of these world elements were transplanted to the radio show. The multiple aliases were largely abandoned, as was (gradually) the Kent Allard part of The Shadow’s back-story. The Shadow’s arch-enemy, Shiwan Khan, never made a radio appearance. Other supporting characters did, however — notably Police Commissioner Ralph Weston. Other key supporting characters of The Shadow’s pulp world, such as taxi driver Moe Shrevnitz and police detective Joe Cardona, appeared as characters in the radio drama – and Shrevnitz’s radio nickname ‘Shrevvy’ (originally not used in the pulps) was eventually transplanted back to the pulp world, too (in The Time Master, 1940). Other world elements, like the Cobalt Club, were recurring features in both pulp magazines and radio shows (the Cobalt Club also appears as a location in The Shadow movie serial from 1940). Conversely, radio character Margo Lane eventually migrated to the pulps and took on a more high-profile role there.

The ‘world’ aspect of The Shadow’s transmediality is in fact not very developed. The basic premise of the character remains the same, as do some world elements, but overall the radio show presents a streamlined version of the considerably more detailed pulp universe of The Shadow – fewer recurring characters (in line with the demands of radio drama) and fewer plot threads that recur over the course of several episodes/magazines. These platform affordances thus also served to limit the transmedial world-building. Furthermore, while certain narrative elements of The Shadow’s story world were transmedial, they were not necessarily very coordinated, and it is difficult to identify one platform as the dominant one. It is clear, however, that the producers of The Shadow aimed for a kind of ‘minimum level’ of worldness across platforms, simply in order for the transmedial production strategy to be meaningful.

Transformers: a brief presentation

At the 1983 Tokyo Toy Fair, American toy company Hasbro spotted some innovative products owned by Takara: robot figures that could transform into vehicles. Attracted to what they saw, Hasbro decided to buy the rights to the toys and sell them under a new brand name: The Transformers (later changed to just Transformers). While Takara managed to negotiate a joint partnership with its American equivalent, Hasbro would develop the brand in new directions. In 1984, the first action-figures were placed on American toy shelves, and a year later the brand was introduced to the international market (Furman, 2007; Hasbro Inc., 2007b). From the outset, the toy-line was promoted by help of an immersive story, largely invented by comic/entertainment company Marvel and told via
a comic book series and a cartoon. What Marvel contributed was an intergalactic saga about the heroic Autobot and evil Decepticon robots from planet Cyborg and the battles between them. Thus from its inception, *Transformers* was made into a media franchise that managed to attract audiences – mainly children or young teenagers – to the toy-line as well as the media platforms (Clark 2007). In 1986, the first animated feature film, *Transformers: The Movie*, was released in cinemas.

A retrospective look at the *Transformers* brand reveals a history of fluctuating popularity. While the property today constitutes one of Hasbro’s ‘core brands’ and has been referred to as a primary example of the company’s new profile as a producer of ‘entertainment experiences’ (Hasbro Inc., 2007a), the property has not always lived up to Hasbro’s financial expectations. During periods of stagnation the toys have been more or less absent from toy stores, brand consumer interest in the franchise began to wane considerably just a few years after its launch (Breznican, 2007). In 1991 the last issue of the first series of Marvel *Transformers* comics was published. While *Transformers* could have been liquidated at that particular point in time, Hasbro’s efforts to revitalize the brand through new product lines and media content have kept it alive for over 30 years.

Through a mix of product reinvention (resulting in new product lines and product categories) and a more or less constant world-building process (also involving comic book companies Dreamwave and IDW), Hasbro and its partners have managed to create a global consumer base, comprising new audiences as well as long-term fans.

In June 2007, the brand underwent its biggest change to date. For the first time ever, the characters from the *Transformers* universe became the heroes and villains of a live-action Hollywood film, created collaboratively by Hasbro, Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks, and produced and directed by Steven Spielberg and Michael Bay, respectively. Six years later, three more films have been produced (2009, 2011 and 2014) and a fifth is planned for release in 2017. Accompanied by a range of spin-off products, promotion, and advertising, the films have expanded the scope of the *Transformers* franchise enormously. At the same time, the move to Hollywood has changed the character of the franchise as well as its narrative world in significant ways.

**From toys to Hollywood: *Transformers* as a transmedia property**

In Hasbro’s hands, *Transformers* was never ‘just’ a toy-line. The original Takara toys had the ability to transform from robot mode to vehicle mode but lacked a narrative context. Wanting to change this situation, Hasbro immediately began to negotiate with Marvel Comics and Sunbow Productions, and within a couple of years the *Transformers* brand had become a media franchise of some scope. Comic book writers Jim Shooter, Bob Budiansky and Simon Furman were particularly influential and provided the robots with personalities and an increasingly detailed world to inhabit. Hasbro, however, was always closely engaged in the development of the media content, and by adding illustrated character biographies to the toy packages they made the connection between the toys and the (comic) narrative even stronger (Breznican, 2007). Hero leader Optimus Prime and main villain Megatron were made key characters from the start – of what has become known as the ‘Generation One’ era of the Transformers franchise – as were, for example,
Autobots Bumblebee, Ratchet and Grimlock, and Decepticons Starscream, Shockwave and Scorponok.

As a consequence of repeated brand reinvention throughout the history of the *Transformers* brand, including releases of new toy-lines, comic books, cartoons, electronic games, theme park attractions and, of course, the Hollywood films, several *sub-worlds* have become established within the larger universe. Such sub-worlds have continuously brought new characters and groups of characters (e.g. the Micromasters, Headmasters and Targetmasters) to the *Transformers* world, but also new versions of original characters. Thus, the personality, name and/or appearance of a *Transformers* robot can vary depending on what sub-world he/she appears in. Different sub-worlds also adhere to different temporalities; for example, the story of the animated 1986 film takes place 20 years after the events of the cartoon’s second season. While stories told in different sub-worlds do tend to connect to some extent, the overall picture is that the *Transformers* story world has developed into a complex transmedia maze, where only certain things remain stable.

In the context of the 2007 film, by which the relatively more coherent and delimited film franchise began to established, we do find some illustrative examples of how the fictional world of the films was expanded across media. While publications like *Transformers: Movie Adaptation* (2007) and *Transformers: The Movie Storybook* (2007) are adaptations that sketched the film plot over a few printed pages, comic books *Transformers: Movie Prequel* (2007) and *Transformers: Official Movie Sequel* (2008) expanded the narrative of the film by providing a back-story and a follow-up story.

However, not only did the *Transformers* world grow considerably at that time through the addition of new content commodities, such as DVDs/blue-rays, toys, electronic games, comics, cartoons, albums, merchandise, and massive promotion. It also grew thanks to a lot of *fan productivity*, including fan-made fiction, art, music, trailers and websites. Such fan-based expansions of the *Transformers* narrative were also encouraged in many of the film marketing initiatives, and ultimately contributed to the transmedial expansion of the franchise.

Through the Hollywood films, the brand has had its popular culture status augmented and new audiences have found their way to the franchise. Indeed, while some of the film marketing for *Transformers* (2007) particularly targeted the most passionate, long-term fans, it also aimed to attract a mainstream cinema audience. According to the marketing director at United International Pictures, international distributor of the films, the target audience comprised 15–34-year-olds (Fast, 2012: 165). The addition of a romantic sub-plot in the otherwise highly gendered science-fiction drama was likely done to appeal to female audiences. The adding of ‘dark’ (in terms of theme and subject matter) electronic games developed by Activision (for consoles PlayStation, Nintendo and Xbox, and PC) further indicates a broadening of the audience segment. Thus, although children aged 4 to 10 remain a key target group for the toys (Fast, 2012: 165), their parents and older siblings have been invited into the franchise as well.\(^2\)

**The ‘worldness’ of *Transformers***

If the toys were once the ‘mothership’ (Jenkins, 2014) of the *Transformers* franchise, and while the plastic robots are still the centre of attention at Hasbro, the successive
introduction of new and self-sustainable media commodities has made it increasingly difficult to point out what exactly constitutes the core of the \textit{Transformers} property. \textit{Transformers} continues to rely on a fairly stable ground of ‘streamable content’ (Murray, 2003, 2005) that has persisted for 30 years and still defines the franchise. Narrative elements established in the early years of the brand’s history are thus recurring in newer versions or continuations of the \textit{Transformers} saga, such as in the recent Hollywood films, comics, electronic games and cartoons. It is thus tempting to think of \textit{Transformers} as a coherent fictional world, masterfully orchestrated by Hasbro and its partners.

At the same time, \textit{Transformers} is an illustration of how even carefully composed franchises may suffer from disjunctions when it comes to world-building. Johnson (2013) stresses that the \textit{Transformers} brand’s growth across national borders has been crucial for its survival and longevity. Yet this growth has impacted on the ‘worldness’ (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004) of \textit{Transformers} in that many narratives are incoherent from a story world point of view. As both the franchise and its story world has grown, and as more and more companies have become involved in the storytelling, the space for parallel stories and conflicting narrative threads has also expanded.

Even in the earliest years of the franchise, different media started to tell different stories, and the dual involvement of Hasbro (US) and Takara (Japan) is at the root of many inconsistencies. Not only have the two companies developed the brand in different directions, according to the supposed demands of their respective markets, but their contractors have in turn handled narratives and characters differently. In addition to the comic book story told by Marvel Comics/Sunbow Productions in the US, parallel continuities were also developed in the UK (by the now-defunct subsidiary Marvel UK), and in Japan. The television programming initiated by Hasbro and Takara respectively exhibit many differences in terms of both plots and characters as well. Furthermore, apart from a dozen official Hasbro reincarnations of the \textit{Transformers} brand there have also been locally specific toy-lines, with their own attendant narratives. For instance, \textit{The Transformers: Kiss Players} was a line of toys produced exclusively for the Japanese (adult) audience in 2006 (TfWiki, 2014). This series’ story world differed from Hasbro’s in significant ways. Most notably, the \textit{Transformers} robots here got their energy and strength from the kisses of young girls (!).

As remarked by Wolf (2012), stories tend to change as they move from one media platform to another, be it for artistic, technological, economic or other reasons. Well before the premiere of the 2007 \textit{Transformers} film, fans were concerned with how the film makers would manage to stay true to what they allegedly conceived of as the original \textit{Transformers} narrative world. Many fans were therefore frustrated when they learned that certain characters were going to be represented differently in the new films compared to previous portrayals (Fast, 2012). According to press interviews, director Michael Bay thought that the fast-paced animations in the films demanded certain visual changes (robots needed defining colour schemes to make audience identification easier in fast-paced fight scenes involving several robots) as well as audio changes (change of voices as well as sound effects) (Roberts, 2013). Decepticon leader Megatron used to transform into a realistic Walther P-38 pistol in the pre-Hollywood universe, while in the films he changes into a Cybertronian jet and a tanker truck. A similar change (one more clearly connected to commercial motives given the massive product placement deal with car
company General Motors), was the decision to have the Autobot Bumblebee turn into a yellow Camaro instead of the original, less spectacular, VW Beetle that he used to appear as in the 1980s comics.

The examples provided indicate the potential problems with moving content across media platforms and the consequences of such shifts for the story world. Ultimately, as a consequence of its growth across national borders, media companies, media platforms, audience segments and production contexts, the *Transformers* story world is as marked by contradictions and irregularities as it is by coherence and continuity. At the root of most disjunctions appears to be the very scope of the *Transformers* franchise and its narrative world. While delimited sub-worlds within franchises such as *Transformers* seem to stand some chance of keeping coherent, content elements significant to the overall story world tend to disappear or change with the establishment of such sub-worlds.

**Conclusions**

In this article, existing theory on transmedia entertainment has been applied to two separate case studies, *The Shadow* and *Transformers*, with the aim of nuancing understanding of this type of entertainment. We have argued for the need to study transmedia properties from different epochs as well as types, and to consider not only the ‘smooth’ examples of transmedia narratives (where sophisticated stories continue to unfold seamlessly across media platforms), but also cases that contain disjunctions and contradictions. While such irregularities might be expected in media franchises that – like *The Shadow* – have successfully come to enter a state of transmediality, it is perhaps more surprising to find them in carefully managed franchises that – like *Transformers* – are designed to be transmedial from inception. But, as we demonstrate, even a high level of coordination in transmedial production comes with its disjunctions – precisely because there is a need to resolve ‘worldness’ issues across media platforms with different affordances and (potentially) different audiences. *The Shadow* story world, originating in a media landscape with fewer platforms, actually has a relatively ‘toned down’ worldness, with producers appearing to identify a minimum level of worldness that will make the character, basic premise and setting recognizable across platforms, but where one platform (print/pulp magazines) is clearly the main one in terms of story world detail. The *Transformers* story world, with its need to maintain some kind of story world coherence not only across platforms but between different iterations within the same platform, is by contrast much more complex, contingent and contradictory – even labyrinthine in its multiple versions and temporal frames. ‘Core’ fans are overall catered to with emphasis on recognizable story world details, but overt attempts to simplify or change the story world (in order to appeal to wider audience groups) are often met with resistance.

Both of our cases are indicative of the changes that narrative worlds go through as they move across media platforms. On the one hand, such changes can be understood as an effect of the affordances of different media. Different media, after all, handle story elements differently (cf. Wolf, 2012). On the other hand, changes to story worlds should also be viewed in the light of writer/company objectives, which may involve, for example, the broadening of an audience segment (e.g. expanding the originally masculine properties of both *The Shadow* and *Transformers* to appeal to a female audience) or the
synergistic linking of commodities within the franchise (e.g. the Transformers film with the toys). From the latter perspective, it is clear that brand-building ambitions often trump world-building considerations, with the effect that the imaginary worlds of franchises are rarely as coherent and consistent as they may wish to appear. Future studies should investigate more thoroughly the nature and character of such inconsistencies, including the logics that cause them to appear in the first place.

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**Notes**

1. The first actor to voice The Shadow in the reworked 1937 series was Orson Welles, a fact that has likely contributed to the continued renown of the show. Welles’ stint on the show was fairly short; he departed in 1938 to work on his famed radio adaptation of H.G. Wells’ The War of the Worlds.

2. Johnson (2013) also notes the ‘transgenerational’ characteristics of the franchise. As he explains, the new generation of consumers imagined for the products related to the live-action films would find their way to the franchise via their parents (Johnson, 2013: 188).

**References**


Author biographies

Karin Fast is Senior Lecturer at Karlstad University, Sweden. She received her PhD in 2012. Her research interests include transmediality, convergence culture, journalism, mediatization and media mobility. She has several publications in these areas forthcoming, including articles in peer-reviewed journals such as *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Henrik Örnebring is Professor of Media and Communication at Karlstad University, Sweden. He has previously worked at the University of Oxford, Roehampton University and the University of Leicester. He has been a Visiting Scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has published widely on journalism and media history, as well as on media convergence and contemporary television narratives.