When discussing promotional culture, especially in passing, we as cultural critics too often reduce it to being exploitative, propagandistic, and the essence of superficiality. It is “only so much hype,” the media equivalent of the used car salesman who annoyingly hounds us around the car lot. Just when we might wish to lose ourselves in a television program and its sentiment, for instance, promotions can remind us of the depressing reality that ultimately the show we’re watching is there to move product as much as, or more than, it is to enlighten, engage, or amuse us. As such, to teach media literacy, to make our students more aware of advertisers’ tricks, and to study how promotions work as semiotic and economic entities can be ways of fighting back. I do not wish to challenge such moves. However, it is my contention that amidst our training as practitioners of cultural jujitsu, we rarely examine promotional culture as culture—as reflective, artistic, worthy of engagement, and as perhaps contributing positively to the mediasphere. Granted, cultural criticism will often focus on how promotions tap into popular culture to find the images and text most likely to provoke an affective response, or we will acknowledge it as an imposed culture, one that makes us spend, eat, and smoke more, yet think less. Important exceptions exist of course, and such exceptions may gradually be becoming the rule, as the other chapters in this collection suggest through their sophistication. But the bulk of published work still rarely considers ads as contributing much aesthetically, unless the aesthetics are a means to a cash-grab end. Ads, though, do not just produce profits, dupes, and the ills of capitalism; they also produce engagement, reflection, interest, meanings, and interpretive introductions to much of the culture that advertising’s staunchest critics
generally regard as more legitimate, artistic, uplifting, and hence worthy of aesthetic analysis.

In the realm of film and television, promotional culture is often a key and indistinguishable part of the artistic product. Behind corporate conglomerates’ horizontal and vertical integration and plans for synergistic conquest of the audience are frequently videogames, posters, ad campaigns, merchandise lines, toys, and trailers that are active sites for the creation, consumption, and enjoyment of the narrative. Many of these “spinoffs,” “extratextuals,” and “peripherals” surround film and television texts with hype, generating revenue themselves at times but also serving the larger goal of directing audiences to the film, show, or franchise. Comparatively little has been written about them, even though they command an inordinately large amount of public space. Bus stops and subways are regular homes to movie posters, almost every television ad break includes at least one ad for another show or for a film, and increasingly they will include URLs directing us to a website for further promotional information. Toy, clothing, game, and souvenir stores teem with licensed merchandise. Amusement parks offer us spinoff rides, iTunes offers us podcasts, and daily emails come to us from Amazon telling us of many deals on DVDs with bonus materials and CDs soundtracks. And so on. Promoting film and television is a huge industry even if academia rarely pays attention to it. The average Hollywood film budgets $36 million for marketing, regularly a third or more of its budget (Friend 2009: 41, 46). Television networks hold back on selling all available ad slots in order to promote their own wares. Amanda Lotz notes that network television annually foregoes over $4 billion worth of ad time to advertise its own programs, airing over 30,000 promos per year (Lotz 2007: 108–9). When not draining money, other forms of promotions can generate large revenues, as with DVD sales and rental figures that regularly eclipse box office receipts or as with the lucrative market in licensed toys and videogames.

Undoubtedly, these promotions have an economic effect on the success of the film or show, especially in a media-saturated environment in which promotions are required to let audiences know the film or show exists in the first place. We could and should also examine how such promotions employ the same techniques—and often the same questionable or outright objectionable techniques—that other ads do. But we must look at not only the ad but also the add—at what is added to the text by the promotions. After all, if someone is moved to watch a certain movie by a trailer, that trailer will
need to have done more than insist that the film be watched; rather, it will need to have constructed a series of meanings, themes, and/or characters to which the audience responds. Similarly, if children play with a licensed toy, it will need to have spoken to them in some way. And if someone spends time rifling through bonus materials on a DVD, watches ads for a television show and contributes to a fan site, and/or plays a licensed videogame, again, something is needed to hook them. In all such cases, the promotional and/or spinoff material will need to use textual hooks, if for no other reason than to differentiate itself from the thousands of other promotions vying for the audience’s time and attention. The promotions need to create a text of their own, in other words, and thus the promotion becomes a text itself. Or, more specifically, it becomes a “paratext” (Genette 1997), a textual element appended and related to a larger text that nevertheless offers its own meanings. Add all these paratexts to their millions of images, narratives, and characters, and consider that a great deal of the meanings of film and television with which we interact—a great deal of the culture—comes to us from the paratexts and promotions.

To better understand the promotional culture that surrounds film and television, I argue, we cannot assume that such paratexts merely echo the meanings of the film or show. Surely, for instance, we have all seen spectacular trailers for what turn out to be awful movies and vice versa. Meaning often begins at the level of the promotion, and even after we have watched a film, or after a show is up and running, promotional materials can still change the text’s meaning. In doing so, promotions and paratexts become viable parts of the text and, by extension, viable contributors to the aesthetics, thematics, and artistry associated with the text. In what follows, I will draw several examples from contemporary media culture to show how central promotional and paratextual materials in film and television become to the culture that surrounds the film and show.

In challenging the promotion/art binary, it is by no means my intention to serve as apologist for Madison Avenue; academic and popular critiques of promotional culture are often well founded and necessary. Thus, I am not arguing that cultural critics give up their day jobs. Instead, I would like us to do more. My purpose is to interrogate the ways in which we delineate often too crudely between culture that “matters” and that is worthy of study as a site for engagement and the creation of meaning, and culture that is “just” advertising. Focusing on how this duality works with promotional culture surrounding film and television properties, the chapter studies how
promotional culture and art are merging and how the work of art is often performed, albeit to varying levels of success, by promotional culture.

**Branding Textuality**

Before looking at specific examples, though, I will first argue that branding is a process that creates textuality and therefore that ads are often as much textual as they are promotional.

Madison Avenue has, of course, long since moved on from the days in which ads would calmly and verbosely describe a product; rather, today’s advertiser needs to create an image to append to that product. In the process, as Sut Jhally writes, ads regularly assume a *tabula rasa*, seeing the product as an empty slate with no prior meaning or history. Next, “once the real meaning has been systematically emptied out of commodities…advertising then *refills* this void with its own symbols” (1987: 51, emphasis in original). Much advertising, then, aims to sell products by creating brand identity, and by promising value-added—product and metaphysics.

Take the Mac vs. PC advertising war in 2008–2009, for instance. Mac drew first blood with its ads featuring comedians Justin Long and John Hodgman. Hodgman represents the PC, an uptight, often smug, unfunny, nerdy, pudgy, and out-of-touch middle-aged man with few social skills yet many an ugly suit, while Long as the Mac is handsome, cool, confident, funny, relaxed, hip, and casually dressed. The ads occasionally offered nominal information about the two computers but largely worked by textualizing the two entities, authoring the Mac as the computer of now and the PC as dumpy and ineffective. They added qualities that cannot objectively belong to a computer—how can a laptop be confident or funny, or nerdy and pudgy for that matter? In doing so, therefore, the relative *actual* qualities for the computers proved almost completely irrelevant. Then, PC struck back with its smart “I’m a PC” campaign, offering many diverse individuals declaring that they are a PC. Unwilling to let Mac’s advertisers author their client’s “text,” PC’s advertisers tried to outdo their competitor by suggesting that PCs are special precisely because no one person can represent them—their text, they suggested instead, is limitless and open. As Judith Williamson explains, everything in an ad works as a gestalt and condensation of the product (1978: 79), and these ads worked to create a story, history, and character for each computer.
As Gillian Dyer notes of the semiotics of advertising, in ads “[t]he meaning of one thing is transferred to or made interchangeable with another quality, whose value attaches itself to the product,” as elaborate semiotic chains are created to tie a product as blank slate to a theme, purpose, and identity—a text (1982: 116–7, emphasis in original). Branding is about surrounding a product with layers of symbolism in an attempt to give it a meaning both for those new to the product and, as value added, to those already owning the product (and, it is hoped, likely to be return customers). No guarantee exists that customers will buy into this textuality and symbolism, but at least in intent, ads aim to make products into texts and into popular culture.

If we turn to ads for films or television shows, the situation becomes slightly more complex, though, since now the film or television show is itself a text. As I type away on my Mac, it offers no story of itself, and, as Jhally (1987) notes, most product manufacturers work hard to erase the production histories of their items for sale, so my Mac needs help in becoming a text, help that an ad is only too willing to provide. By contrast, a film or television show already offers a text, so the advertiser’s role is now to produce a text for a text. The tension involved in such a process can often result in icy relations between directors and marketing teams, as discussed in a *New Yorker* article featuring Tim Palen, Lionsgate’s co-president of theatrical marketing (Friend 2009). Writer Tad Friend charts how Palen will often create campaigns for films that the directors themselves hate, and regard as wholly unreflective of their work, simply because he feels his own text is likely to sell better than the director’s. For example, Palen decided to market Oliver Stone’s *W.* as a controversial, cheeky and irreverent look at President George W. Bush, even though Stone’s film treats its subject as a tragic figure; Palen thought the irreverence would succeed at finding an audience better than the suggestion of a more measured, sympathetic approach, and thus he sold a different text. Surely, too, we have all been victims of trailers or ad campaigns that excited us about a film or television show, or that suggested a different genre or tone, only to be deeply disappointed when eventually watching what is basically a different text. Even when they are not radically augmenting texts, promotions will often amplify specific qualities of texts and downplay others, thereby subtly re-authoring the public record of the text. In all such instances, we see that even texts can be retextualized, and rebranded at the level of the promotion.
At the same time, it would be foolish to believe that initial textual con-
structions simply vanish upon watching a film. As numerous audience re-
searchers have examined, a large part of consumption has to do with the
hopes and expectations that one brings to the text, and if promotions have
already surrounded a text with themes and meanings, these cannot simply
be turned off upon viewing (e.g., Barker and Brooks 1998; Barker, Arthurs,
and Harindranath 2001). Further, lest we make the mistake of thinking that
only viewers of the film or television show contribute to that film or show’s
presence in popular culture, we should remember that millions of potential
viewers see the promotions and then walk away without having seen the film
or show, yet with a sense of why they won’t see it, and hence with a sense of
what it means. For such non-viewers, the promotions are the text. Thus,
texts begin not with the film or show’s consumption but with the paratext
or promotion’s consumption for both viewers and non-viewers. As such, to
study the meanings created by paratexts, and the branding of the text, is to
study more fully texts’ lives away from the film or show.

Springfield Sprawl: *The Simpsons* beyond Television

To find the culture in promotional culture and to see the sprawling text in
action, we could begin by turning to Exhibit A for promotional culture in
today’s media environment, a town of four-fingered, yellow residents called
Springfield. While many readers might successfully identify Springfield as
the home of the Simpson family, surely few readers regard Springfield as
trapped solely within the television show, *The Simpsons*. Rather, Springfield
and *The Simpsons* are seemingly everywhere, overflowing from television to
comics, clothing, toys, videogames, a film, ads, books, DVDs, CDs, key-
chains, cell phone rings, and countless other platforms. One would struggle
to find any other show in television history whose global presence has in-
volved so many promotional tie-ins. Admittedly, many of these promotional
spinoffs generate revenue in and of themselves, so they are not solely pro-
motional, but they have rarely been considered as part of the text itself in
academic studies. Instead they are more often classified as part of the show’s
promotional sphere. Here, however, by focusing on one particular instance
of *Simpsons* overflow—the online ads for *The Simpsons Game*—I want to
argue that the text, and the artistic object that is *The Simpsons*, exists in part
in its promotional wing.

I choose the ads for *The Simpsons Game* in part to be perverse, since, as
the ad for the videogame timed to be released following *The Simpsons Movie* based on the series, it is a promotion for a promotion timed to the release of another promotion of a show. As such, it would be easy to focus on it first and foremost as a hypercommercialized money-grab, as a synergistic attempt to squeeze as much money as possible from a successful media product. Ads for games of a movie of a television show rate low on most traditional scales of artistic value. However, upon closer examination of these ads, we can see a viable source of *The Simpsons* as text.

Should one have sought out *The Simpsons Game*’s website or been directed there by its ensuing viral popularity, one would have found a series of links to parodic trailers for supposed standalone videogames, each of which used *The Simpsons* to parody established and popular games or game genres (and each a level in the actual game). One of these—*Medal of Homer* (see Figure 14.1)—went on to win a Golden Trailer award for innovative videogame advertising, given that it deftly parodied both the *Medal of Honor* games specifically and war games and war films more generally. With a grave yet sweeping orchestral and choral soundtrack befitting the likes of *Saving Private Ryan*, the ad opened with a series of zoom-and-pan scratchy black and white war “photos” (drawn in *Simpsons* style), playing with the visual style of Ken Burns documentaries, and of *Medal of Honor*’s cut sequences. Title cards were interspersed throughout such photos, reading “In the Last Great Invasion” “Of the Last Great War” “They Gave Each Other the Strength” “To Make History.” This reverent spectacle was interrupted following the third title card, though, as we cut to a shot of Homer scratching his behind. The irreverence then bubbled up further following the last title card, as a prancing Homer interrupted, “Oooh, I’m France, I’m a little girl. I don’t want to be bombed and attacked.” The ad continued to its conclusion, cutting between shots of, for instance, Homer belching flame or rolling around as a huge human blob and shots framed to mimic war movie trailers.

In short, many of the key ingredients of *The Simpsons* were in the ad: significant irreverence and bodily humor, especially from Homer; *The Simpsons*’ signature brand of attractive animation; smart, brilliantly executed media parody that lampoons the seriousness with which war games, war films, and their soundtracks take themselves; and the snark for which the show is famous. All of this took place in a brief, 80-second clip, replicating the television show’s style of offering short bursts of media parody. One was not just watching an ad for the game of the show, in other words: one was get-
ting *The Simpsons* itself. As with much comedy, *The Simpsons* television show is often broken down into smaller segments, each of which can work independently, and here the online ad offered a similar segment, just as rich with Simpsonesque humor and style as anything one might find in the television show. As an ad, the clip may be seen by some as less authentic, as simply hawking its wares, and as purely secondary to the primary text that is the *Simpsons* television show. But it produced and continued the text of *The Simpsons* with considerable skill. This paratext, in other words, is part of the text, having become a site not only of the production of the text but also of engagement with the text. The ad was as much a part of the artistic object that is *The Simpsons* as is an amusing sequence from an episode on television.

Nor was it alone in this regard. *The Simpsons*' history, and many of its public meanings, have often relied heavily upon its paratexts and promotions. While producers and authors play a role in creating art and while I have suggested that the ad’s producers and authors contributed to this production, art is also created by consumers, and an artistic object’s place in society will always rely as much on its audience as on the object itself. For a notable example of audiences authoring *The Simpsons* and determining its place in popular culture at the level of the promotion and the paratext, we could rewind the clock to its early days on air and especially to the Bart

![Figure 14.1 The Medal of Homer page on The Simpson Game's website.](image)
Simpson T-shirt craze of the early 1990s. A furor surrounded the show in its early years, a furor directed at Bart as irreverent youth, but one that centered on—and was in many ways ignited by—the mass popularity of Bart T-shirts labeling Bart an “Underachiever,” while he responds, “And Proud of It, Man.” Many parents, teachers, principals, and pundits around the United States worried about children learning a slacker attitude from the T-shirt’s sentiment, and as a result, many schools banned the T-shirts, and conservative rhetoric and complaints swarmed around the show (see Glynn 1996; Parisi 1993). This rhetoric completely failed to realize the sly message in the T-shirt: as Laurie Schulze notes, “Bart has managed to turn the tables on the system that’s devalued him and say, ‘In your face. I’m not worthless, insignificant, or stupid. If you want to label me an underachiever, I’ll turn that into a badge of courage and say I’m proud of it’” (qtd. in Brook 2004: 178). Nevertheless, as paratext, the T-shirt created an image for many Americans of The Simpsons as a show of little to no values, intent on corrupting children’s minds.

In 1992, at the Republican National Convention, President George H. W. Bush sealed this image of the show when he insisted that the U.S. needed more families like the Waltons and fewer like the Simpsons. In doing so, Bush confirmed The Simpsons’ role as a front in the nation’s culture wars between conservative America and liberal America. While The Simpsons was infused with Matt Groening’s anti-establishment beliefs, sly satiric edge, and irreverence, the T-shirt controversy and the Bush speech suddenly amplified these qualities. Now, to watch The Simpsons, and/or to wear the T-shirt, was to posit oneself proudly against Bush’s neo-conservatism, while to dislike the show, and/or to ban one’s children from seeing it, was to publicly declare one’s allegiance to those ideals. The promotional material made the show considerably more controversial, edgy, and anti-establishment than many of its episodes did. Certainly, in England, where the T-shirt controversy never bubbled up to the same degree, and where Bush’s comments received considerably less attention, the show was often seen as endearingly pro-family values, to the point that Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has often proudly and unflinchingly sided with Bart over Bush, claiming that The Simpsons is “on the side of the angels” (BBC 2004).

To understand why paratexts and promotions are so powerful, we might reframe the issue as one of time and space. At the time of this writing, The Simpsons airs in the U.S. on the FOX network on Sundays at 8 p.m, and usually at several other half-hour slots during the day in syndication. Thus,
the show itself is strictly contained by time and space. However, *The Simpsons*’ paratexts allow Springfield to exist well beyond those boundaries. Echos of Springfield are found in most shopping malls, throughout cyberspace, in countless souvenir stores worldwide, in games and electronics stores, on newsstands, in comic stores and bookstores, in TV specials, lying on the floor of many a child’s room, in Burger King and MasterCard ads, on many an adult collector’s shelf, on people’s chests and heads, and in countless other venues. Such is FOX’s strategy of synergy: that people will not be able to escape Springfield. But when Springfield is seemingly everywhere, a sprawling suburb that knows no bounds, many people will only experience Springfield outside of the television show, as suburbanites who never visit the city of the show itself. Even many of those who regularly watch the show at its scheduled time and space will also experience Springfield in countless other locales. *The Simpsons*, therefore, often exists in the paratexts and promotions, and those paratexts and promotions are fostering many of its meanings and its fans’, non-fans’, and anti-fans’ reactions.

**The Many Planets of Star Wars: The Toys and Their Films**

If *The Simpsons* has proven to be a franchise par excellence for television, a filmic counterpart is the phenomenally successful *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* still has arguably the most voluminous paratextual entourage in entertainment history. Writing in 1992, before the franchise’s proliferation of videogames, and before the second trilogy opened the floodgates for yet more merchandise sales, Stephen Sansweet noted that *Star Wars* had earned over $2.5 billion from merchandise alone (1992: 14). Spearheading *Star Wars*’ early merchandising efforts were its action figures, with 42 million selling for a profit of $100 million to toy company Kenner in 1977 alone, and with 250 million selling by the early 1990s (Sansweet 1992: 71). It is such success that has often placed *Star Wars* in the crosshairs for cultural critics who see it as responsible for kicking off the host-selling era of 1980s television, with *My Little Pony*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, *The Transformers*, and colleagues taking over toy stores and Saturday morning television-watching in a well-coordinated effort in part modeled on *Star Wars*’ success. Again, rather than see *Star Wars*’ promotional culture and merchandising solely as a strategy to dupe kids into pledging allegiance to The Force, we might examine what meanings the toys added to the franchise, and the degree to which they helped shape common conceptions of and enjoyment of the *Star Wars* text.
Licensed toys have traditionally provoked the ire of cultural critics more than an attempt to understand their complexities (e.g., Englehardt 1986; Kline 1989). Thus, we know them to help profits, but little has been said of their textual role. A rare, and more nuanced, analysis of licensed toys can be found in Dan Fleming’s *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture*. Rejecting the notion that licensed toys are simply spinoffs of other properties, Fleming instead argues that they generate their own textuality, as events in an ongoing process of textual phenomenology (1996: 11). “There may be a great deal going on,” he notes, “when a child plays with the [licensed] toy, for which a TV programme cannot be held responsible” (1996: 15). Such toys, he argues, continue the story from a film or television program, but also provide a space in which meanings can be worked through, and in which questions and ambiguities in the film or program can be answered. Turning specifically to the *Star Wars* films and toys, Fleming notes first that central character Luke Skywalker is “a rather softly defined character,” thereby allowing children playing with the toys to give the film’s apparent hero a more resolute character in their play, or to identify with any of the other characters/toys instead. Similarly, he regards the toys as providing a relatively open field of play for children, resulting in a “deliberate generation of complexity” for the *Star Wars* text and an “ultimate refusal of narrative closure” (1996: 96, 102). Where the films required set plots, themes, and endings that would in turn aim for resolution, the toys allowed children to play up or down established themes, and to make their own substantial imprint on the *Star Wars* universe. Thus Fleming sees the toys as variously able to strengthen or to weaken established meanings in the films. In particular, for instance, he notes that with a “softly defined” hero surrounded by a motley crew of aliens, creatures, ships, and weapons:

Perhaps unwittingly, what Kenner had tapped into with their original range of ninety-two small *Star Wars* figures (with more for the succeeding films) was precisely those contexts in which the original character of Luke Skywalker had been meaningful. The little plastic version of Luke seems very much at home surrounded by his menagerie of odd associates. And fitting him neatly into a plastic spacecraft with lots of opening panels, movable bits and quirky shapes was precisely the point—the technological environment was being adapted to offer a human “fit” and qualities of human variety (1996: 99).

The toys, in other words, may have accentuated the films’ narrative of a youngster coming to terms with the difference and all the technologies that surround him. Luke’s mastery of this environment grows throughout the films, but with all the figures under his or her control, the individual child’s
control would have been significantly more assured, hence strengthening the theme of the growing up narrative.

If we take Fleming’s lead to examine the phenomenology of not just the toys but the entire Star Wars text, we find that the toys held the potential to play a sizeable role in the development of that text. For while Springfield must move out from the television show into its paratexts between 8:30 p.m. Sunday and 8:00 p.m. on the following Sunday, Star Wars’ galaxy far, far away has lived via its toys and spinoff promotions and merchandise for much of its time in the universe. Star Wars fans had to wait for three years between films, stringing each trilogy out over six years. Between 1977 and 1983 in particular, before the ubiquitous presence of VHS in Western homes, if Star Wars was to live, it had to enter the body of paratexts. Toys became ways to keep the series alive. Between 1980’s Empire Strikes Back and 1983’s Return of the Jedi, young fans were left with multiple questions (Is Darth Vader Luke’s father? Will the Rebellion rise again? What’s happened to Han Solo? Will Luke become a Jedi?) that necessitated a transference of text to toy/paratext for many young fans. What happened during those years, as Fleming suggests, is that Star Wars invited young fans to take over to a certain degree. With the backdrop of a cosmic battle between good and evil, as Fleming states (here of the GI Joe toy line), “what perpetuates the whole line in all its interrelated forms, is perhaps the child’s endless pursuit of the story within the story, of what is really going on while the aggression rages” (1996: 107). Fans were being asked to fill in the spaces that existed just off screen. A grand, protracted war of mythic proportions had been set up, an army of figures and vehicles sold, and the individual child was left in charge, becoming, in play, part of the battle, balancing right and wrong. The child was asked to bring all sorts of concepts together—good and evil, science and nature, rationality and intuition, childhood and adulthood, power and responsibility, familiarity and otherness—to provide synthesis.

Interestingly, too, many of the figures are of characters who prove entirely peripheral in the films. Characters who walk across the screen as alien extras become full-fledged figures, and many characters are named only as toys. To take one example, “Hammerhead” appears briefly in Star Wars: A New Hope sitting in the Cantina. S/he has no lines, nobody references him/her, and we learn nothing about him/her. Thus, when faced with the toy, the playing child can assign Hammerhead a gender, can make him/her a “good guy,” yet another Imperial, or something altogether different, and
can perpetuate his/her peripheral status or assign Hammerhead new importance. To the individual playing, Hammerhead could have been a traveling salesman, Admiral Ackbar’s lover, an ace Rebel fighter pilot, and/or Mos Eisley’s town drunk. In no small way, then, these toys allow children to feed meanings back into the proscribed narratives. Here we can draw parallels with what many commentators have noted of fan fiction’s expansive capacities (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Penley 1997; Brooker 2003), except a key difference is that the toys are licensed, as is play, and so no six-year-old received cease and desist letters from Lucasfilm’s lawyers for acting out stories in the school yard.

With such examples, we see how the toys not only intensified several themes of the film—the focus on the cosmic battle, and the voyage of personal discovery especially—but also allowed children to personalize these themes, situating themselves in the middle and as active participants, not just as distanced spectators. And they kept those meanings and the text itself alive and thriving. The toys worked to ensure *Star Wars* and its meanings stayed relevant, and kept circulating, added to, and being refreshed. It is perhaps no coincidence that in the mid-1990s, as Lucas announced his intention to make another trilogy, new toys (and, now, videogames) were sent forward as minions to throw coals on *Star Wars* fans’ old flames. The toys, in other words, have never merely been profit-makers: they have played a vital role in, and have become a vital part of, the primary text and its unrivalled success.

So successful were the toys that to some critics, they may appear to be the actual show, and the films the promotions. Writing of Disney’s films’ relationship to the Disney videos and merchandise, for example, Robert Allen suggests that the films are simply “the inedible part of a Happy Meal” and the “movie on the lunchbox” (1999: 119, 123). Allen’s proclamation may alarm us if we see promotional culture as entirely debased of meanings other than shifty, devious pleas to purchase, and empty superficialities designed to get us to the purchase, but we might instead see it as a mere reflection that promotions are often vibrant parts of an artistic object, not inherently different, distinct, and removed entities. Certainly, a closer look at the *Star Wars* figures would reveal many other ways in which they accentuate the films’ themes, in particular clarifying the story into a grand battle of good and evil, and into a family saga. I examine both meanings in greater detail elsewhere, also exploring the degree to which the toys gendered the text (Gray 2010), but here I want to underline that the toys have become
inseparable from the public understanding and appreciation of Star Wars. To many of its fans, Star Wars has not only extended itself but at times resided in toys/paratexts.

The toys have also played a large role in communicating Star Wars to non-fans, and even to non-watchers. After all, if one considers the ubiquity of Star Wars toys in Western society particularly in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, then the toys can still be seen as having played an important role in determining what Star Wars is and means to society as a whole. Children need not have played with the toys, and adults need neither have bought them nor been implored to buy them, for the toys to register as central to popular culture. Given the near-omnipresence of the army of Star Wars merchandise, many non-fans will likely have experienced more Star Wars through their run-ins with its paratexts and promotional entourage, and through their meanings, than with the films themselves. When Springfield or a galaxy far, far away overflow into public space, non-fans are more likely to experience the text at the level of the overflow, raising their own messages, themes, and narratives to primary status in the public understanding of a text.

Heroes and Sidekicks: Telling Stories with Promotions

Star Wars had many followers, and while it was hardly the first media property to realize the goldmine that exists in merchandising, with Disney in particular already an accomplished transmedia marketer, its success certainly seems to have been responsible for kicking in a new era of transmediality, one to which entities such as Transformers, Pokemon, and Harry Potter are indebted. However, not only did it propose a relatively new business model to a rapidly converging and conglomerating media industry; it also proposed a relatively new way to create stories and characters to a generation of writers who grew up with it. For example, when discussing transmedia with me at the 2008 Disney Studios and International Radio and Television Seminar’s Digital Media Summit, Lost showrunner Damon Lindelof began by explaining the history of Star Wars’ Boba Fett, a character whose cult popularity was established as a toy. Lindelof drew inspiration from Star Wars’ act of telling its story across media including films, toys, comics, novels, and videogames, and felt that he and Lost had learned a great deal from this transmedia narrative style. Likewise, former Heroes co-executive producer and writer Jesse Alexander was clear in an interview with me that Star Wars
showed him that transmedia storytelling was not only possible but the way to go.

With this in mind, we could examine *Heroes* and its use of transmedia storytelling—or, to rephrase, its use of promotional material to tell a story. Shows such as *Lost, Heroes*, and a growing number of others are written either across multiple media venues—television show and website, film, and comic book—or at the least with other media venues in mind. *Heroes* was 2008’s Emmy Award winner for Outstanding Interactive Media Programming, as the story overflowed into various websites and MySpace pages set within the fictional frame of the show, into novels that covered gaps in the television narrative, into an elaborate text message-based game, into online competitions to create a new hero, and into an online graphic novel. It is to this graphic novel that I wish to turn.

The online graphic novel was a free comic that cleverly weaved in and out of the television narrative of *Heroes*, at times following and repeating actions from the show, at times offering fuller context or background, at times penning entirely new material and episodes. *Heroes* the television show often adopts a comic book aesthetic, visually in filming angles and in opening frames that offer titles in comic book style, and thematically in its interest in superheroes. Moreover, several characters have obtained the ability to see the future and draw it in comic book style, and another comic-book loving, time-traveling character has often sought guidance from a comic series called *9th Wonders*, penned by one of the aforementioned clairvoyants. The inclusion of a comic book in the show’s transmedia arsenal was almost to be expected. Undoubtedly, NBC also looked upon the comic book as a way to draw in the comic reading demographic; as a free spinoff, the comic would need to have been justified to the network as promotional by nature. Nevertheless, it is also rich with narrative and often beautifully penned.

The comic book is visually evocative, drawn by numerous well established comic book artists, including Michael Turner, Phil Jimenez, Micah Gunnell, and Marcus To. It is written by a collection of *Heroes* writers, moreover, and thus was not “farmed out” to another company. And rather than simply transpose elements from the show into the comic book, it introduced an entirely new character, Hana Gitelman (aka “Wireless”), who similarly exists across many of the show’s other transmedia venues. After enough episodes had been penned to be collected in print, the *Heroes* staff bound them with two alternate covers drawn by famed comic book artists.
Jim Lee and Alex Ross. The comics can be read independently of the series, albeit with difficulty, or as a supplement that adds extra information and narrative. In this regard, they are promotions but also viable sources of diegesis. Whereas *The Simpsons* has no discernible developing narrative, thereby rendering its various transmedia venues “in world” but not contributors to an ongoing narrative per se, and whereas *Star Wars* toys and videogames allow fans to add their own imprint on the universe yet not in canonical fashion, *Heroes*’ comic book is an instance wherein the narrative continues and is expanded upon, canonically, in a “promotional” venue.

**Pizza as Text? A Conclusion**

In these various examples, I have illustrated how promotion and text, or ad and art, are merging, with no clear line between them. However, cultural criticism has often proven to be heavily invested in the existence of a firm line, frequently suggesting that being promotional obviates being artistic or contributing to the meaning of a text, and that being promotional is always and only about being promotional. For instance, writing of “alternate reality games” (ARGs) that surround some films and shows, drawing audiences into the diegetic frame to solve puzzles, much as *Heroes* has done with its comics and other transmedia, Henrik Örnebring exhibits frustration with how “there is relatively little academic concern with how ARGs function as marketing tools.” He reiterates further that “[t]heir primary purpose is not to create new opportunities for interaction, networking and audience participation in mediated narratives, but simply to create an enjoyable experience that will build the franchise brand in the minds of media audiences” (2007: 449, 450). He is correct, of course, to point out that most ARGs are designed to advertise and to create buzz, like the *Heroes* comic book and *The Simpsons Game*’s online ads; many are allowed to exist because they brand the text. But as I have been arguing, Örnebring’s hard and fast division between marketing and branding on one side, and interaction, networking, and audience participation on the other, ultimately cannot hold. Branding is the process of making a product into a text, and thus when the product is itself a text, branding in and of itself need not mean anything more than adding sites of construction for that text. What Örnebring calls the ARG’s “simple” task “to create an enjoyable experience that will build the franchise brand in the minds of media audiences” will quite often require that the ARG works “to create new opportunities for interaction, net-
working and audience participation in mediated narratives.” His division, as such, folds back on itself, illustrating the degree to which many promotions confuse the industry’s and academia’s binary of marketing and creativity.

Örnebring’s criticism offers something of a red herring. Of course the profit imperative of an ARG may dictate the course of the story and may considerably hamper the scope of the narrative. But this is a problem endemic to all commercial media, and hence to films and television programs too, not just promotional material. In the case of film and television, the profit imperative is bound tightly to the narrative impulse, but this does not necessarily overwhelm that impulse. David Simon and HBO needed to make money with *The Wire*, as did RKO and Orson Welles with *Citizen Kane*, but this does not debase either text. By no means do I suggest that we should drop our concern with rampant commercialism and with the problematic nature of stories that aim to sell, but once more this is an issue endemic to film, television, and popular culture as a whole, not just to ARGs, spinoff toys, online ads, and other promotions.

Paratexts can confound and disturb many of our hierarchies and binaries of what matters and what does not in the media world, especially the long-held notion that marketing and creativity are or could be distinct from one another. In doing so, some invite us to study promotions not only as commercial culture—though of course we should still do so—but also as commercial *culture*.

Admittedly, some promotions serve only to annoy consumers. But hype and promos are likely to do so only when the consumer does not care about (or actively dislikes) the related text, when the promos contribute nothing or take away from the text, and hence when they do not make the leap from being just a promo to being something more. Take, for instance, a promotion for Domino’s *Dark Knight*-related “Gotham City pizza.” As critics touted the film’s dark aesthetic, I found myself wondering what a pepperoni pizza was supposed to add to *The Dark Knight* as text. The pizza’s and the ad’s sole contribution was to signal the size of the film (“it even has a pizza named after it”). This move was wholly unnecessary, given the scale of the advertising campaign, and it was trumped by the pizza’s and ad’s act of taking away from the film, making it seem, well, cheesy. The paratexts were wholly unincorporated, therefore, not a problem because they were an ad and a pizza, but a problem because they were an ad and a pizza that contributed nothing meaningful to the text or its narrative, storyworld, characters, or style. By contrast, such a promotion may have fit *Spider-Man*, given
alter ego Peter Parker’s stint as delivery man, or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, given the characters’ love of pizza. For *The Dark Knight*, they were only ads and pizzas.

Alongside the Gotham City pizza, we can place countless other examples of promotional material that fails to add anything substantive to the storyworld, or even to sample that world for would-be viewers. We could also point to cases when the promo’s meanings clash with those of the text, as for instance when a show is sold as one genre when it is in fact another. Such moments may cause confusion as to what the text is actually about. Let me be clear, then, in stating that I am not arguing that all promotions contribute meaningfully to the artistic object. Nor am I suggesting that those that do contribute should be exempt from criticism for their promotional aspects. Rather, I am arguing that it is wholly insufficient to regard “promotion” or “advertisement” as totems that ward all artistry or meaning away from a text.

Nevertheless, cultural criticism has often taken promotional culture as such a totem, and the consequences for the state of media and cultural criticism have been severe, as we have tended subsequently either to ignore ads in our work, or to study them only insofar as they are purveyors of rampant consumerism. We have forgotten to look at the culture in promotional culture. It has been beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the multiple benefits of art and of narrative, and their value to society, but I hope it is safe to assume these benefits and values as read; if so, we must conclude that film and television promotions can serve an aesthetic function and an important cultural function in society. They are not just leading us further into a spiral of consumerism based on debased values—although at times they may certainly be doing that as well. Rather, they do the work of art.

Hollywood has long since recognized the importance of promotional material, channeling large portions of budgets into creating it. Increasingly, too, some of the industry’s most talented individuals are working in its promotional wings, and many of its big name writers and directors are crossing over to ensure that their ARGs, spinoffs, tie-ins, and promos synch up with the text they’re creating. In the course of researching my book *Show Sold Separately*, I interviewed numerous producers of DVD bonus materials, licensed videogames, ARGs, and web extras, and all approached their work as artists. A quick browse through fan sites, moreover, will confirm that many audiences consider such promos viable parts of the artistic object. Even in the field of labor relations, the 2008 WGA strike proved that the
line between creation and promotion is being challenged within Hollywood, as one of the writers’ (unmet) demands was to be fairly compensated for creating webisodes and other promos that traditionally the industry has regarded as merely promotional. What I am posing, then, is that it is high time that we in academia catch up. While producers, fans, writers, and budgets have been operating with implicit acknowledgment of the importance of promotions, we have often kept our eyes steadfastly on the film or show itself. In doing so, multiple meanings have eluded us. If close reading, production analysis, audience ethnography, and critical theory of films and television shows have long been in our toolkit, we must now apply the same analytical tools to promotions.

Notes

1. This article draws in large part from Gray (2010). Thanks are extended to NYU Press for allowing me to reprint occasional passages and case studies.

2. For a particularly notable exception, see Kernan (2004).

3. A later toy moved to shut down some of these meanings by giving Hammerhead a gender and a name, Momaw Nadon, and by labeling him as a gardener. Nevertheless, by this point, undoubtedly many toy owners had invented their own canon regarding Hammerhead.

4. For more, see Gray (2010).

References


