More than Meets the Eye

Transmedial Entertainment as a Site of Pleasure, Resistance and Exploitation

Karin Fast
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To

Andreas
Amanda & Oskar
Abstract

Today’s converging entertainment industry creates ‘transmedial’ brand worlds in which consumers are expected to become immersed. Integrated marketing campaigns connected to these worlds encourage various kinds of consumer productivity and invite consumers to partake in brand-building processes. Consumers, thus, are increasingly counted on to act as co-producers of contemporary entertainment. While such an altered consumer identity has been taken as evidence of enhanced consumer agency, it has also been recognized as a source of consumer exploitation.

This thesis aims to further our understanding of the increasingly ambivalent power-relationship that exists between agents in the entertainment industry and their most dedicated customers – the fans. The study employs a multiperspectival theoretical framework, in that cultural studies theory is enriched with perspectives from political economy. This integrated approach to the object of study yields a better understanding of the values of consumer activity, and fan productivity in particular, to industry and consumers respectively.

The study applies existing theory on transmedial textuality, branding, and fandom to one particular franchise, Hasbro’s Transformers. This brand world, home of both industrial and fan-based creativity, is studied through analyses of official and unofficial contents, and through interviews with professionals and fans. The focus is on the brand environment established around the first live action film ever made within the franchise. Special attention is given to the all-encompassing film marketing campaign that contributed to forming this environment and to fan productivity taking place in relation to it.

The case study shows that companies and fans contribute to the building and promotion of the Transformers brand world – in collaboration and in conflict. While fan productivity occasionally takes place without direct encouragement from the companies involved, it is also largely anticipated and desired by marketing campaigns. The findings suggest that consumer enjoyment potentially translates into industrial benefits, including free brand promotion. Ultimately, the thesis acknowledges transmedial worlds of entertainment as concurrent sites of pleasure, resistance, and exploitation.

Keywords: Transmedial, entertainment, world, brand, media convergence, producer, consumer, fandom, power
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Lidköping, November 13, 2012
Karin Fast


1 Introduction

For consumers, brands are means of production (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 93)

The title of this thesis is borrowed from the world of popular culture. Over the years, the phrase ‘more than meets the eye’ has served as a title of several music albums and songs. In this thesis, however, the words first and foremost constitute a reference to the Transformers franchise, on which this thesis relies for its empirical data. When the first Transformers-branded robot toys and their accompanying television series and comic books were launched by Hasbro in 1984, the phrase was used as a tagline. With the release of the first live action film ever made on the property in 2007, the phrase was once again used in the promotion of the brand. The line ‘more than meets the eye’ indeed fits well with a brand concept that has transformation as its central theme. Since the Transformers toys and characters own the capacity to alter from one mode to another – for example, from robot to car, plane or helicopter and vice versa – they are definitely more than they appear to be at first sight. With a few twists of hand or joystick, or over a few picture frames, the Transformers simply become something else.

Figure 1.1: More than meets the eye. Early taglines by which the Transformers brand was sold emphasized the toys’ transformability by stating that they were ‘more than meets the eye’. The toys in this image were released in the context of the live action film franchise (Hasbro Inc., Product catalogue 2007).
Hence, part of the reason for my thesis title is that it refers to the franchise which constitutes the case studied in this thesis. There is, however, a further reason for this choice. As this thesis will make clear, ‘More than meets the eye’ is also a proper tagline for contemporary economic-cultural phenomena such as Transformers in general. Today’s popular culture franchises constitute complex and sophisticatedly drawn worlds of entertainment, which principally are designed to include synergistic and intertextual links between all involved components, developed over a range of product categories and platforms, built and maintained by various forms of strategic alliances, and enjoyed by consumers and fans almost all over the world. In essence, when digging deep into the multifaceted layers of these worlds of entertainment, they certainly come across as more than meets the eye.

1.1 Points of departure

By necessity, the chosen case study approach puts the Transformers brand at the center of attention in this thesis as I seek to understand how worlds of entertainment, such as this, are created and promoted by industry and consumers and, especially, how the power-relationship between these two groups of agents is constituted. My thesis thus begins and ends with reference to this brand. It is important to note, though, that however fascinating and intriguing the toys, stories and characters of the Transformers franchise may be, the main objective of this thesis is not to study this brand as a narrative but rather as a window on processes taking place within contemporary culture. Due to economic, political, technological, social and cultural transformations, the entertainment industry looks drastically different today than it did in the early 1980s, when the first Transformers robot saw daylight. During the last three decades especially, we have witnessed the growth of an entertainment business characterized by contradictory, yet often related, trends. These include, but are in no ways limited to, processes of commodification through which content is converted into diverse, intertextual commodities, and processes of spatialization through which companies extend their interests into more and more industry sections (Mosco, 1996).

It is one of the underlying assumptions of this thesis that such overarching trends are both reflected in and spurred by practices taking place in the contemporary entertainment industry.

1.1.1 Transformers in ‘convergence’ and ‘brand’ culture

Many of the trends characterizing today’s entertainment industry can be related to the notion of media convergence, a concept typically used to refer to a range of processes by which previously separated categories or entities merge. This
thesis places the *Transformers* brand in the context of what has been called contemporary ‘*convergence culture*’ (Jenkins, 2006a) and principally in relation to what has been claimed to be one of the most central characteristics of this culture: the blurring of producer and consumer identities. The increased popularity of terms such as ‘prosumption’ (Toffler, 1980) or ‘produsage’ (Bruns, 2008) – evident both inside and outside of academia – indicate that these identities are converging to the extent that they can no longer be held separate. Since the early 2000 especially, corporations and researchers alike have begun to acknowledge that economic value is *co-created* by actors engaged in the market process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; see also Cova, Dalli, & Zwick, 2011). While not without its own history, the more collaborative relationship between producers and consumers has been said to have advanced with the development of new media technology and with Web 2.0 in particular (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Likewise, it has been claimed to have given rise to an essentially new type of capitalism in which previously established economic structures become altered (cf. Terranova, 2000; Arvidsson, 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Indeed, contemporary media technology affords, or even demands, more *active and participatory* consumers. Such consumers can undoubtedly be found throughout the media system, not least in the global entertainment industry. Today’s popular culture, with the Internet as one of its most central arenas, is a place in which consumers seem as capable of making themselves visible and clamorous as the companies that provide them with a steady flow of textual building-bricks to work with (Sandvoss, 2011). Adding their own “user-generated” content, and actively circulating their appropriations to peers, the consumers of contemporary entertainment could certainly be said to act as *co-producers* of the often tremendously all-encompassing brand worlds, which have come to constitute the backbone to the global entertainment industry (cf. Kinder, 1991; Mechan, 1991; Marshall, 2002).

These *brand worlds*, in turn, show evidence, not only of the increasingly liquid boundaries between producers and consumers in the era of media convergence, but also of the escalating importance of brands in present-day consumer culture (cf. Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2005; 2006). Thus, beyond constituting a window into ‘convergence culture’ as it would appear at the time of this thesis, *Transformers* can also be read as a symptom, as well as a driver, of contemporary ‘*brand culture*’. Not without reason, it has recently been suggested that we have moved from a commodity culture to precisely a “brand culture” (Lash & Lury, 2008). Although such a label could be criticized for downplaying the role still
played by materiality in contemporary life, brands certainly have come to occupy a central place in today’s consumer culture. While brands represent growingly important immaterial capital for companies, they function also as cultural assets which become employed in identity- and community-building processes for consumers (cf. Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Arvidsson, 2005; 2006).

There are many proofs of both the cultural and economic significance of brands within the sphere of entertainment. As observed by Adam Arvidsson, for example, “brands have become part of a global popular culture” (2006, p. 4), and in the entertainment industry, awareness of the economic value of brands reveals itself in the companies’ strategic documents as well as in their everyday operations. At the most manifest level, this awareness becomes expressed in the conglomerate business structure characterizing our largest entertainment industries – a structure that has been driven forward by synergy ambitions in general and cross-promotion objectives in particular (Wasko, 1994; Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Grainge, 2008; McChesney, 2008). In today’s convergence culture, it standard for entertainment brands to extend across multiple media platforms and product categories; that is, to advance into transmedial worlds of entertainment.

While, largely, brand extensions are born out of economic considerations and strategic thinking in product development and marketing departments, brand worlds grow for other reasons too. Parallel to corporate-driven brand extensions run consumer-driven dittos, spurred not so much by commodification objectives as by affect and passion. For, just as film content, for example, is likely to become translated into a range of commodities and merchandise, it may also translate into non-commercial productions, such as fan fiction, fan videos, fan websites, or the similar (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; Brooker, 2002; Shefrin, 2004; Sandvoss, 2011). Again, in contemporary convergence and brand culture, which are correspondingly marked by active consumer participation, brand worlds such as Transformers are jointly built by professionals and amateurs – in collaboration and in conflict.

1.1.2 The question of power

The increasingly participatory consumership, which both convergence and brand culture seem to provoke and demand, has been taken as evidence of a significant redistribution of power amongst agents engaged in the market process. More specifically, it has been argued that value co-creation and brand co-production render a more equal relationship between producers and consumers.
However, while certain academics have taken the convergence of producer and consumer identities as an indicator of flattened power hierarchies, and while many PR-agents (at least in their communication with consumers) have embraced the development as a sign of increased consumer sovereignty, not all observers are as enthusiastic. And as things are, there seems to be valid reasons to add critical perspectives to the current debate on consumer agency in relation to company practices. Recent research indicates that the power hierarchies between professionals and amateurs in fact remain fairly intact, not least due to factors related to ownership and intellectual property law. As some have also suggested, it might even be argued that, in some respects at least, today’s entertainment consumers are disempowered in relation to the producers as their enthusiasm and “free labor” (Terranova, 2000) are readily being exploited for commercial purposes (cf. Andrejevic, 2007; 2009; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; van Dijck, 2009; Comor, 2011).

As this brief description of the controversy makes evident – and as the subsequent chapter will make even clearer as I provide added details on the arguments delivered within the frames of the debate – the state of contemporary convergence and brand culture requires us to pose imperative questions about power. With two main groups of agents, media companies and consumers, making claims on today’s entertainment brands and ultimately wanting to control these brand worlds, questions that deal with the implications of media convergence on the producer-consumer relationship certainly call for answers. Addressing such issues imply that you do not take the media or cultural landscape for granted, or as a naturally given, but rather as something in which power hierarchies exist and are contested by all actors within the system.

Indeed, within media research, questions of power have always had a central place. This does not mean that all media research always addresses the issue, but, in any case, in the fields of cultural studies and political economy the concept of power has always been a key. For this reason too, knowledge and perspectives offered within both of these research traditions have informed the theoretical framework of this thesis, as well as its general focus and research design. Already the choice of research area – which inescapably and simultaneously makes it a study of ‘popular culture’, ‘active audiences’, and ‘fan culture’ – positions the thesis in a tradition of cultural studies that for decades has taken an interest in these subjects and that draws on valuable insights offered by the influential Birmingham School in Great Britian and American cultural theorists like Henry Jenkins and John Fiske. Most importantly, this stream of research has provided instrumental comprehensions of why media culture matters to everyday people and how people make (sense of) the cultural. The theory developed
within cultural studies, then, provide a conceptual toolbox that enables me to understand how the *Transformers* brand is turned into fan culture and thereby how it is (re-)produced outside of the immediate sphere of the entertainment industry.

Yet, despite the rich body of knowledge produced by cultural studies scholars, and for all of its relevance to this thesis, political economy perspectives are also applied in this study to “correct” some of the – in my view at least – unfortunate shortcomings of the former. For, at the same time that popular cultural theorists have meritoriously raised our awareness of the powers of active audiences to *negotiate* or even *resist* dominant meanings, such as those provided by the media industry, they have largely failed to acknowledge the extent to which ‘subcultures’ or ‘fandoms’ become intentionally produced by corporations and how they are forced to operate according to conditions set up and chiefly controlled by these corporations (Hills, 2002). At best, and perhaps as a reaction to critique delivered by, not least, political economists, industrial practices and structures are inserted into fan literature as ‘context’. As indicated above, and as my declaration of research purpose and research questions below specifies, my study is aimed at investigating how the *Transformers* brand becomes produced and promoted both by industry and by fans. Thus, if my interest in popular culture, audience activity, and fandom has guided my selection of theory from the cultural studies tradition, my objective to also clarify, for instance, processes of ‘commodification’, ‘spatialization’ and ‘labor’ in relation to the production and promotion of the *Transformers* brand world, has called for political economy as a vital source of knowledge too. Within this stream of research, questions about how culture becomes *produced by industry* and how the media and its contents are *owned and controlled* are imperative.

Political economists and cultural theorists have, for obvious reasons, traditionally approached the issue of power differently – ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically. Most notably, media researchers in each tradition have tended to “locate” power in different places and shapes, as a consequence of the different objectives and objects of study (the doings of the media industry and the media consumer respectively, to generalize). Whereas political economists have conventionally located it to the media industry, or to the underlying economic structures of this industry, cultural studies scholars have stressed the empowering aspects of audience activity. It is to be noted, however, that while political economists and cultural studies scholars typically have placed different emphasis on *economic* and *semiotic* forms of power respectively, both traditions tend to acknowledge and stress *hegemonic* forms of power as essential when explaining how power structures are reproduced or potentially challenged in society. By combining insights of cultural studies and
political economy, we can move away from the insolvable dilemma of “who has got the most power – the producer or the consumer?”, and instead ask questions about what forms of power we may detect when studying an economic/cultural phenomena such as Transformers, and how these forms may manifest themselves in the producer-consumer relationship. As David Morley has suggested, we simply cannot assume that we can easily measure different kinds of power by the same rod, since “The power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets” (1997, p. 125).

The different research foci of political economists and cultural theorists, and their emphasis on dissimilar forms of power, have occasionally led to an unwarrantedly infected debate between representatives of both fields, in which precisely the issue of power has constituted a contested subject. Importantly, this thesis does not seek to, “once and for all”, solve the long-lasting (and admittedly also largely fruitful) controversy between cultural studies and political economy media research. Rather, my decision to combine theories is purely pragmatic: a combination of perspectives is simply necessary for the purpose of the thesis. In the subsequent chapter, I will provide more details on how I draw on political economy to supplement my analysis of the Transformers case as well as offer suggestions as to how Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual toolbox – and most significantly his notion of ‘capital’ (cf. 1984; 1986; 1993b; 1996) – can fruitfully serve as a mediator between an “economist” and a “culturalist” reading of this particular brand world.

1.2 Research purpose, research questions and delimitations

No doubt, media convergence involves complicated processes which call for academic attention. While existing studies on the subject have provided valuable knowledge and enriching perspectives on media convergence, also in regard to its cultural consequences, we still have only just began to understand the implications of media convergence for the practices of the media and entertainment industries on the one hand, and on consumer’s everyday experiences with the products delivered by this industry on the other. In order to develop our understanding of processes related to converging media technologies, we certainly need to explore these matters in more settings and contexts, and, as I have suggested above, from a range of different perspectives.

By using the Transformers brand as my empirical case, I hope to shed more light upon these highly complex matters, which in no way, to date, have been exhausted research-wise. The object of study in this thesis then is the Transformers brand world. My epistemological object of study, however, is the
relationships that establishes between producers and consumers who share an interest in this particular brand. As Bourdieu (cf. 1984; 1993b; 1996) has convincingly shown, it is by studying relationships, or positions, that we can investigate the delicate matter of power.

Power inequalities become visible in different places within the media system. This should not necessarily be taken to mean that the industry has exclusive command over their brands, nor should it be imagined, however, that the consumers can do whatever they want with the industrial "raw material" provided to them. Rather, it can be assumed that the exercise of power amongst the two groups of agents takes on different expressions, and that both producers and consumers put up restrictions in regard to what the other part can and cannot do to these kinds of brands. Certainly, the industry, and the brand owner especially, would want a sense of control over their intellectual properties, but so would the fans, who, as earlier research has shown, tend to think of the object of their fandom as something belonging to them (cf. Baym, 1998; Harris, 1998; Shefrin, 2004; Jenkins, 2006b), and who take pleasure in creating their own, unofficial texts in relation to these brand worlds. Next to the producer-consumer relationship, then, the liaison between corporately produced and consumer-generated texts is also important to consider. As recognized by Ingunn Hagen and Janet Wasko, for example, media texts "are obviously a meeting point in order to understand the intersection between media production and consumption" (2000, p. 19).

Applying both a cultural studies and political economy perspective to the study of Transformers as a case, the thesis aims to:

- provide a deeper understanding of the increasingly complex relationship between producers and consumers in the context of transmedial worlds of entertainment, with a particular focus on how power is being executed by various agents within the context of the brand-building process, and against the backdrop of the ongoing debate on the social and cultural consequences of media convergence.

As most entertainment brands, the Transformers brand can be expected to constitute a site of 'participation' (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b). Given what was argued earlier about the state of contemporary convergence and brand culture, this franchise can indeed be expected to host convoluted collaborations between brand owner Hasbro, its many partner companies, and the global fan base. To the extent that consumers and fans do contribute to the actual building and promotion of the Transformers world, the brand could definitely be claimed to form a particular ‘participatory culture’, to use Jenkins’ (2006a) terminology. Simultaneously, and also with respect to earlier arguments, the same brand world can also be assumed to arise as an arena of 'struggle' (Certeau, 1984;
Fiske, 1989; 1997a), in which the interests of producers and consumers potentially clash. On the basis of these two possible scenarios, and on the background of the claims stressing the collaborative nature of contemporary producer-consumer relationships, the following question is relevant to begin with:

A. How do producers and consumers, in collaboration and in conflict, contribute to the textual building and promotion of the Transformers brand?

This question will be answered through an examination of how companies and consumers, respectively and jointly, contribute to the growth of this transmedial brand world by adding new – official and unofficial – components to it. Due to the relative durability of the Transformers brand, and hence the need to delimit my research to a specific period of time, the particular focus in this thesis rests on the efforts undertaken by producers and consumers in connection with the release of the very first live action film ever made on the brand: Michael Bay’s Transformers from 2007 (Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks).

This film, as well as the marketing initiatives that were launched to promote it, spurred many activities both amongst the companies involved and within the global fan base. A rather significant part of the film marketing campaign encouraged the consumers to engage in the brand in more or less extensive ways – for example, by sharing contents with peers or by becoming textually productive. This observation certainly rimes with findings from previous studies, which reveal a growing interest among companies to nurture consumer activity in relation to their brands (cf. Jenkins, 2006b; Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009; Hardy, 2011). However, while brands per se are significantly “open-ended” objects (Lury, 2004, p. 151), brand managers, as pointed out by Arvidsson, aim at at making branded objects “resist certain uses, and invite others” (2005, p. 245). Following Arvidsson, the 2007 Transformers brand world should be conceived of as a “pre-structured” (2005, p. 247) space in which certain forms of consumer activity were anticipated and others not. Thus, beyond considering how this world became jointly created by producers and consumers, we need to ask further questions about the conditions under which any possible consumer participation took place. Therefore, with the ambition to critically investigate consumer agency in relation to brand-building, I add a second research question to this thesis:

B. In what contexts, under what premises and on whose initiative do consumer participation in the Transformers brand take place?

Like the first question, this should be understood in the context of the activities (chiefly marketing-oriented) that were generated by the theatrical release of the
Implicit in question A and even more so in question B is the issue of power and control. However, as argued above, instead of trying to measure producer power against consumer power to find out “who has the most”, we should acknowledge that the relationship between producers and consumers contains different forms of power, and that these forms might be unequally distributed among involved agents. Ultimately then, the answers offered in relation to question A and B contain the essential clues to answering my final research question, which is as follows:

C. In the building and promotion of the Transformers brand, what forms of power can be detected in the producer-consumer relationship, and how are these forms distributed between the two groups of agents?

It is my belief that my theoretical basis in cultural studies with the addition of valuable political economy perspectives is a fruitful approach to identifying forms of power amongst producers and consumers respectively. Likewise, due to the elusive nature of certain forms of power, I believe that the appropriate approach to a study of this kind would be to look for different expressions of power in different places. For this reason too, my study employs a holistic multi-methodological research design and includes analyses of producer and consumer action as well as of producer and consumer discourse (see more on methodology under section 1.5 below).

1.3 Working definitions

The above purpose formulation and research questions make use of several concepts which deserve to be defined carefully to secure validity. In this thesis, these and other concepts are explained progressively and thoroughly as I develop my theoretical framework. However, to provide the reader with a better understanding of my goals and intentions at this point of writing, the below simplified list of definitions may prove helpful. Apart from terms used in my purpose formulation, the list contains other concepts which are employed frequently in this thesis.

**Agents**: This term is an umbrella term for producers and consumers/fans acting in relation to the *Transformers* brand (see Chapter 2, ‘Contextualization and positioning of thesis’).

**Brand-building process**: This term refers to strategic activities undertaken by brand owners or licensees in support of a brand, including marketing (see Chapter 4, ‘World-building by industry’).
Consumers/Fans: Notwithstanding the fact that professionals and companies too are consumers of content, or the idea of value co-creation, to avoid confusion of terms, the label ‘consumer’ exclusively refers to non-professionals in the system. When referring to particularly active consumers, the term ‘fan’ is used instead (see chapter 5, ‘World-building by fans’).

Power: In the most simplistic sense, power is here understood as the ability to influence or exercise control over a brand world, such as Transformers (see section 1.1.2 in this chapter and Chapter 2, ‘Contextualization and positioning of thesis’).

Producers: As this thesis will indeed make manifest, consumers and fans may well be ‘producers’ in several respects, and not least of content. However, again as to avoid confusion of terms, this thesis reserves the term exclusively for agents operating within the entertainment industry. When necessary, the modifier ‘professional’ is added to the term (see Chapter 2, ‘Contextualization and positioning of thesis’).

Text: The term ‘text’ has a special meaning in this thesis, and is (except for in my methodology chapter) reserved for the narrative universes which films, comic books, games, toys, and other signifying ‘textual components’ help construct. Thus, rather than labeling the 2007 Transformers film a text, I write of the Transformers storyworld as the text (see section 7.4, in Chapter 7, ‘Building and promoting an immersive brand experience’, for an elaborated definition of the term).

Transmedial worlds of entertainment: This term refers to entertainment franchises whose contents unfold across several media platforms or product categories (see Chapter 3, ‘Transmedial worlds of entertainment’).

1.4 Theoretical framework: Aspects of media convergence

The introductory sections of the present chapter have already revealed some of the possible theoretical perspectives through which my research subject may be interpreted. From a broad viewpoint, my theoretical framework can best be described in terms of two intersecting dimensions. If the first is constructed on the notion of power, and is established through an integration of perspectives offered by cultural studies and political economy, the second dimension centers on the concept of media convergence. As argued, the Transformers brand is regarded as an outcome, but also a generator, of contemporary convergence culture. However, this culture is apparent on different levels and for this reason too, my theoretical framework has been constructed according to three particular aspects of convergence, which can be claimed to be most relevant for the understanding of a phenomenon such as Transformers.

My first theoretical chapter focuses on textual convergence. This chapter argues that, in increasing degrees, today’s entertainment worlds are being designed to constitute complex “webs of promotion” (Wernick, 1991), or alternatively, “commercial supersystems of transmedia intertextuality” (Kinder, 1991)
in which the borders between different types of cultural forms inevitably – yet nonetheless intentionally – become blurred. Most significantly, with all the more integrated marketing “experiences” developed across media platforms, and with an increasing number of ‘paratexts’ (Genette, 1997; Gray, 2010) produced to hype and promote today’s entertainment brands, the lines become dissolved between promotion and non-promotion, as well as between primary and secondary texts. This first of my theoretical chapters is therefore intended to guide my analyses of the Transformers brand as a textual world, whose components are carefully crafted to form part of a never-ending circuit of (self)promotion.

In my second theoretical chapter, I shift focus to the kinds of convergences which occur as companies in different sectors, placed inside or outside of the traditional entertainment industry, collaborate in the making and marketing of transmedial brand worlds. As pointed out earlier, while different companies still produce different products, many of them nonetheless engage in the same brands. Ultimately, ‘strategic alliances’ (Arsenault & Castells, 2008) which extend across media platforms and over industrial sections can be understood as risk reduction strategies on behalf of the companies involved (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Extensive licensing deals, wide-ranging co-branding activities, and joint efforts undertaken to create synergy across product categories not only potentially reduce the risk involved in commercial entertainment, but also contribute to the blurring of boundaries between industrial sectors as well as between entire industries. Thus, if my first theoretical chapter put focus on Transformers as a textual phenomenon, my second provides the tools to analyze it as business, operating across media platforms, product categories and industries.

My third theoretical chapter, finally, deals with the perhaps most debated aspect of convergence at the time of writing: the convergence of producer and consumer identities. In particular, the chapter focuses on the most active and “productive” group of consumers, the fans. Characterized by deep engagement with their favorite brands, the fans do not settle with simply being “receivers” of media content but want to contribute with their own material. Although not always the case, fan productivity may both be taken advantage of by the brand owners (cf. Meehan, 1991; 2000; McCourt & Burkart, 2007; Örnebring, 2007; Sandvoss, 2011) and restricted with reference to intellectual property law (Murray & Weedon, 2011; Tushnet, 2007). As more and more companies do seem to become increasingly tolerant vis-à-vis fan productivity, and even encourage it, it becomes particularly relevant to consider the notion of ‘fan labor’ (cf. Baym, 2009; Martens, 2011). This chapter, thus, provides the tools to understand
Transformers as an arena of power negotiations, where producers and consumers meet, collaborate, and struggle.

As obvious from this chosen structure, my theory chapters can also be seen to reflect the three fundamental components of the circuit of communication: text (the first chapter), producers (the second chapter) and consumers (the third chapter). In other words, my theoretical framework supports the full-circuit study that I aim for and which will be briefly described next.

1.5 Methodological approach: A ‘full-circuit’ study

My ambition to approach the Transformers brand world as both culture and economy – or as a world driven forward and cared for by both pleasure-seeking consumers and profit-seeking companies – has called for what I refer to as a full-circuit approach to my object of study. Essentially, this means a holistic research design that allows me to approach my object of study from the three key perspectives described in my theoretical framework: as text, production and consumption. As already mentioned, the commodities and paratexts making up the 2007 brand environment constitute a major focus in my thesis; yet rather than analyzing these textual elements in isolation, I have endeavored to consider their contexts of production as well as consumption (contexts which admittedly, as a result of prosumer activity, often come across as the same). This endeavor has, for example, led me into analyses of Hasbro’s corporate infrastructure and overall branding strategies, but also of fan perspectives on the Transformers brand and of selected cases of fan productivity performed in relation to this brand.

Logically then, a full-circuit approach requires a multi-method research design, such as that managed by the case study approach. As noted by Robert K. Yin, a case study methodology is particularly useful when one seeks to understand “complex social phenomena” (2009, p. 4) and/or “contemporary events” (2009, p. 10); both of which, I would argue, defines transmedial worlds of entertainment. By definition, the case study approach usually means that the researcher gathers empirical data from different sources and by the help of complementing techniques, which, potentially, can increase the study’s validity (Mason, 2002; Yin, 2009). The data generated within the frames of my study of the Transformers brand world stem from a range of sources, including official marketing material, corporate documents, press articles, fan-made media content, and online fan conversations. They also derive from interviews with professional producers and fans, conducted as either personal conversations or as focus group dittos. All data are qualitative in character and have been analyzed
through text analyses, mainly inspired by semiotics and critical discourse analysis.

The potential gains of conducting full-circuit studies are many. Also on this point, my argumentation develops over the following chapter, but here I want to stress some of the benefits of such studies. Most notably, studying Transformers by looking at both how the brand is professionally produced and how it is consumed inevitably demands treating Transformers as simultaneously a cultural and an economic phenomenon. Transmedial worlds of entertainment are always and concurrently ‘show’ and ‘business’, as Eileen Meehan (1991) has aptly pointed out, and as such, they carry both cultural and economic values. While such an insight would not come across as revolutionary to anyone with the slightest insight into these worlds (or cultural commodities at large, for that matter), one of the central causes of the cultural studies/political economy conflict, as also stressed by Janice Peck (2006), is that both fields, to large extents, continue to treat economy and culture as separate spheres, despite the obvious inaccuracy and unproductiveness of such a dialectic approach. My own literature review, which is accounted for in the next chapter, also makes evident that many studies do tend to put a more or less reductive focus on either ‘culture’ or ‘economy’; either ‘use value’ or ‘exchange value’. Ultimately, the full-circuit approach “forces” the researcher to get involved with and appreciate the understandings of cultural phenomena that have developed in different research traditions with different epistemological, theoretical and methodological preferences. Potentially then, research projects involving a combined focus on text, production, and consumption would serve to bridge different traditions.

1.6 The Transformers case: From toys to Hollywood

A lot of people remember Transformers from the 80s when it was in its heyday, but it’s actually been around ever since. And since 1984, Transformers has generated over $3 billion in retail sales and that’s, you know, one of the top franchises in history (Greg Lombardo, Marketing Director at Hasbro, in the Transformers DVD documentary).

The Transformers brand has since 1984 been owned by Hasbro Inc., one of the world’s two largest toy companies (the other giant actor is Mattel Inc.). However, the property has its origin in Japan where a couple of successful robot toy-lines called Henshin Cyborg and Microman were introduced in the 1970s and early 1980s. Allegedly, the American toy company caught a glimpse of the toys at the Tokyo Toy Fair in 1983, and decided to buy the rights to a range of changing robots in Japan and unite them under the umbrella name The Transformers.
Takara, however, was not ready to leave its robots entirely in the hands of Hasbro, but agreed to become a chief partner in the development of the brand. In 1984, the first packages of toys were sold in the U.S., and one year later the brand was launched internationally (Hasbro Inc., 2007, February 9; Furman, 2007; Teletraan I Transformers Wiki, 2010).

Already from the start, the toyline was sold with the bait of constituting “two toys in one”. Their construction allowed the player to modulate the toy from robot to, for instance, a vehicle, weapon or, eventually, animal. Essentially then, what characterizes a Transformers toy is its ability to change form. Also from the launch of the first toys, the brand was enriched by a story and the various robots were turned into characters. This was done primarily through the employment of four storytelling devices: an animated cartoon series, a comic book, an animated film (from 1986), and special packaging biographies (so called “technological specifications”), which provided details about the figure’s name, technical abilities, strengths, weaknesses, etc. In different versions and with different degrees of continuity, the television series and the comic books have run with the toy-line almost without major disruptions.

As the Transformers property has aged, new elements have been added to the brand world, including console and online games, novels, websites, and of course – the live action film franchise that has developed over three Hollywood films so far (a fourth film is in the makings as this thesis is being concluded). As later parts of this thesis will tell, the Transformers brand’s successive transition into a full-fledged entertainment “experience” has run parallel to brand owner Hasbro’s equally successive development from a traditional toy company to a ‘branded play company’ with significant interests in the media sector. Michael Bay’s live action films – of which, again, the first plays a central role in this thesis – gave the brand an augmented popular culture status as they opened the franchise to new audiences. Along with the rich body of fan work done on the brand, the last years’ events have indeed rendered Transformers an increasingly complex transmedial world. While my results chapters will provide further details on both the brand’s and Hasbro’s developments over the last decade and beyond, the time line below may function as an illustration of Transformers’ move from toy to Hollywood.

Before closing this chapter with an overview of the chapters to come, some words about the Transformers narrative are in place, as at least some basic knowledge of this may facilitate the reading for the non-fan reader and put the marketing described in the thesis into context. However, the fictional lore into which the toys have been inserted is not easily summarized due to the inconsistencies and contradictions that have developed across the different media. Yet, on a basic level, the Transformers saga is about “sentient” and super ad-
advanced robots from the planet Cybertron. In Michael Bay’s live action universe, some of these robots find their way to planet Earth when searching for vital energy – contained in the so-called ‘Allspark Cube’. Some of these robot life-forms, the ‘Autobots’, are friendly, whereas others constitute a danger to the entire human existence. The latter fraction of robots, the ‘Decepticons’, fight a war not only against the good robots, but also against all of humankind. A young man called ‘Sam’ unwittingly becomes one of the Autobots’ closest and most important allies, as he accidently happens to buy one of them while in “car mode”. Eventually, ‘Sam’ finds himself caught up in an action-filled adventure with the tough task of convincing the remaining human civilization that not all of the robots are evil.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early 1980s</td>
<td>Japanese toy companies start to manufacture transformative robot toys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Hasbro acquires the licensing rights to a number of Japanese robot toys and initiates collaboration with Marvel Comics to build a background story to their new toy brand, <em>The Transformers</em> (later only <em>Transformers</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>The first <em>Transformers</em> toys are released on the market and become a success. The accompanying after-school cartoon – written and distributed by Marvel Productions and Sunbow Productions – contributed to the big sales, as did the Marvel comic book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Two sub-lines, ‘Headmasters’ and ‘Targetmasters’, are released and supported by a Marvel comic book. The cartoon series, which has run from 1984, is concluded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>Other sub-lines, including ‘Powermasters’, ‘Pretenders’ and ‘Micromasters’, are introduced to re-boost the declining consumer interest in the brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>The popularity of the brand is modest and after the introduction of yet another sub-line, ‘Action Masters’, Hasbro cancels the <em>Transformers</em> line. Marvel Comics publishes the last issue of the original <em>Transformers</em> comic book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>After two years with no new <em>Transformers</em> figures at sale in U.S. toy stores, the so-called ‘Generation 2’ line is introduced, with classic characters appearing in new color schemes. To build support for the new toy-line, Hasbro turns to Marvel Comics again to publish a new comic book series. Also at this time, slightly altered episodes from the original cartoon start to air on television. With the new story, the entire franchise is directed towards more extreme violence, with weapons playing a central role. The toy-line becomes a success, yet the comic book series is cancelled after only 12 issues due to poor sales figures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>The first ‘BotCon convention’ is arranged by fans and held in Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA. The convention has been run annually ever since, yet with progressively increased control by Hasbro.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Spurred by the success of the ‘Generation 2’ toy-line, Hasbro launches a new sub-line of <em>Transformers</em>, ‘Beast Wars’. Robots with familiar names now trans-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
form into beasts or insects instead of machines, and the toys sells well. The toy-line is supported by a television series that starts to air in 1996.

2001 Hasbro imports cartoon series ‘Robots in Disguise’ from Takara, mainly as a filler before the next major toy-line and accompanying media. The series is a self-contained universe, disconnected to all previous storylines.

2002 Hasbro, in close collaboration with Takara, launches a new Transformers concept, ‘Armada’, which, among other things, introduces a new sub-line of robots: ‘Mini-Cons’. ‘Armada’ was the first television series co-produced by Hasbro and Takara with the aim of creating a toy-line for simultaneous release in Japan and the U.S. The concept came with a range of merchandise, including a PlayStation 2 video game, and the toy-line became the success that Takara and Hasbro had hoped for. Also in 2002, Dreamwave, having taken over the Transformers licensing rights from Marvel Comics at this point in time, released a comic book in support of the ‘Armada’ concept.

2003-04 After the bankruptcy of Dreamwave, IDW Publishing takes over the licensing rights to the Transformers comic books, and publishes a series of books featuring the classic robot characters. Also at this point in time, the successful ‘Armada’ is followed up by the ‘Energon’ concept – launched with the help of the second co-produced television series from Hasbro and Takara and another comic book series.

2005 The ‘Energon’ concept is followed up by ‘Cybertron’. While in Japan the accompanying television series constituted a break with the previous narrative continuity, when launched in the U.S. Hasbro had modified the show so that it would continue where ‘Energon’ had left off. Also this year, Hasbro, Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks confirm plans to make the first live action film on the brand, directed by Michael Bay and executive-produced by Steven Spielberg.

2007 The first live action film made within the franchise, Transformers, premiers on theaters globally on July 4th. Backed up by a new toy line, a range of merchandise and other media, and grossing $709,709,780 world-wide, the film becomes a box-office success. On December 26 the same year animated television series ‘Animated’, produced by Cartoon Network Studios, premiers on Cartoon Network.


2012 The first season of ‘Transformers: Prime’ is made available for instant streaming via Netflix.

Figure 1.2: Genealogy of the Transformers brand, 1980s-2012 (Hasbro Inc., 2007, February 9; Teletraan 1 Transformers Wiki, 2010; Wikipedia, 2012).

1.7 Disposition

The thesis begins with an introductory chapter presenting my research area, purpose, and associated questions, working definitions, theoretical and methodological approaches, and the empirical case. Chapter 2 provides a contextual-
ization to my arguments by offering relevant perspectives on ‘consumer’, ‘brand’ and ‘convergence’ culture. Also, this chapter positions the thesis in the intersection between cultural studies and political economy as well as motivates my choice to conduct a full-circuit study. Chapter 3, 4 and 5 comprise the thesis’ analytical framework and provides the concepts and perspectives through which my results can be understood and problematized (see section 1.4). Chapter 6 describes my methodological approach to the object of study by introducing key data sources, methods, and sampling strategies. This chapter also contains a critical account of the study’s quality, with a focus on internal and external validity. Chapter 7 and 8 present the results of my study: Chapter 7 introduces Transformers as economy and places its focus on Hasbro’s branding strategies, the overall film marketing campaign supporting the 2007 live action Transformers film, and selected marketing efforts; Chapter 8 shifts focus to the consumer side of the franchise and presents Transformers as a participatory culture by accounting for fan perspectives and fan practices in relation to the brand world. In Chapter 9, which essentially is intended to synthesize the results presented in the two previous chapters, Transformers is presented as a site of pleasure, resistance and exploitation. In Chapter 10, finally, the condensed answers to my research questions are offered, followed by suggestions to additional research.
2 Contextualization and positioning of thesis

The aim of this chapter is two-folded. My first aim is to provide a context to my area of study by relating it to some significant changes within the contemporary consumer, brand, and media culture. Today’s global entertainment is an integral part of our everyday consumer culture, in which brands and advertising seem to play increasingly significant roles. Likewise, contemporary entertainment is born and advanced in a media world marked by converging technologies, industries, markets and, not least, identities. My theoretical framework will later offer some important analytical tools for understanding these matters on a deeper level, yet my aspiration in this chapter is to provide some wider perspectives on the contemporary consumer and media culture in which Transformers and similar phenomena have come to exist. For this reason, the chapter begins with a brief historical account of the rise of ‘consumer culture’ and continues by highlighting the role played by brands, marketing and advertising in this culture. After this, I move on to addressing different aspects of ‘media convergence’, which has been found to impact greatly on how entertainment brands become produced and consumed today. The focus in this particular section is on the cultural consequences of converging media technologies and, most importantly, on its suggested effects on the relationship between professional producers and consumers in the contemporary media landscape.

My second aim in this chapter is to position my study in relation to previous research in the field. Since I hold the conviction that knowledge originating in cultural studies needs to be complemented with insights generated in the tradition of political economy in order to understand a phenomenon like Transformers – which concurrently is both pleasure and business – I here develop my argument for what Douglas Kellner (1997, p. 102) has labeled a “multiperspectival” cultural studies. By approaching Transformers as a set of relations rooted in both the cultural and the economic spheres, my research will serve as a bridge between these two schools of thought. The chapter ends with some suggestions as to my thesis’ possible contributions to the field of media and cultural studies.

2.1 Perspectives on ‘consumer’ and ‘brand’ culture

Given the enormous scope of commodities on sale on an everyday basis in our society, and the growth of channels by the help of which these commodities are visualized and advertised, ‘consumer culture’ indeed seems a rather fitting label for contemporary life. As noted by Mike Featherstone, the term is normally used to stress “that the world of goods and their principles of structuration are central
to the understanding of contemporary society” (1992, p. 82). Whilst, as justifi-
ably stressed by for example Frank Trentmann (2009) and Daniel Miller (1994),
we should not fool ourselves into believing that our modern-day, Western cul-
ture is the only one to have ever been built on merchandising and trade – in-
deed, ancient Rome and Athens as well as the Niger region and India have been
described as early ‘consumer cultures’ (Trentmann, 2009) – the possibilities for us
to purchase around the clock have never been as many as right now; especially
if we consider the Internet as a twenty-four-seven available, global, shopping mall.

Underneath our everyday understanding of the concept of consumer culture,
however, there is a rich body of theory seeking to explain what it is that the
term ultimately refers to. Most notably, this body of theory encourages us to
think about the role of goods in our everyday lives (cf. Appadurai, 1986; Douglas &
Isherwood, 1996; Miller, 1994; Woodward, 2007). As suggested by Celia Lury,
consumer culture can be regarded as a particular form of material culture in which
people communicate and connect to each other by the help of things (1996, p.
1; see also Miller, 1994). Establishing such a perspective on consumption is va-
lueful in that it encourages us to think about consumption in a different way
than the traditional. By considering not only how people ‘use up’ things but
also how they ‘use’ them, we allow ourselves to regard consumption as some-
thing which is not the opposite of production but in fact a process of production in
itself (Lury, 1996, p. 1). Similar view-points have been put forward by other
contemporary culture analysts, such as Mike Featherstone, who urges us to ex-
plore the “culture of consumption and not merely regard consumption as de-
rived unproblematically from production” (1992, p. 13), and Don Slater, who
similarly dismisses discourses which, in his view, falsely lead us to think that
production is the “engine and essence of modernization” (1997, p. 16).

As stressed elsewhere in this thesis, this way of thinking about consumption
– as a constructive rather than destructive process – has been central to much
cultural studies work from the late 1970s and onwards, in which media con-
sumption, especially, is considered a highly productive activity. This shift in
thought, in turn, can be related to the growth of different kinds of anthropolo-
gical research that came to provide some nuancing and largely also contrasting
perspectives vis-à-vis earlier social science literature. If much of the academic as
well as political focus had previously been on processes of ‘work’, ‘labor’ and
‘production’, the latter half of the twentieth century saw the rise of cultural an-
thropologists beginning to emphasize the complexities of ‘material culture’, ‘le-
isure’ and ‘consumption’. Thus, Lury’s (1996), Featherstone’s (1992) and Slater’s
(1997) arguments above should all be viewed in relation to this new research paradigm, and perhaps especially to Mary Douglas’ and Baron Isherwood’s claim, made in the 1970s, that “the very idea of consumption itself has to be set back into the social process, not merely looked upon as a result or objective of work” (1996, p. viii).

According to this anthropological perspective, we can never fully understand contemporary consumer culture by regarding it solely as a consequence of new modes of production, such as those prompted by the industrial revolution. However, while the industrial revolution, and the ensuing mode of mass production, did not give rise to the first consumer culture to ever have existed, it is hard to deny that this historical process – along with a subsequent chain of events – intensified certain processes which would give consumption an even more prominent place in the modern society. When Karl Marx wrote his critique on capitalist society in Germany in the 1860s, the second wave of the industrial revolution was transforming Western Europe. Inventions within manufacturing, agriculture and communications changed the lives for almost everyone and came to alter the relation between production and consumption radically. No longer were people primarily producing stuff for their own needs but for the market, and no longer did the production occur primarily in the homes but in factories (Jansson, 2001).

If steam engines and ‘Spinning Jennies’ from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ England put a spin on mass manufacturing, developments in the U.S. in the twentieth century would bring modern consumer culture even closer. Industrial pioneers such as Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford contributed to the standardization and rationalization of American manufacturing and made assembly-line mass production the norm (Ewen, 1976/2001; Strasser, 2009). Mass production, though, is only valuable for as long as there are people buying the commodities produced; what was needed in the ‘Fordist’ era was thus mass consumers. The prosperous middle- and upper-class markets were no longer enough to swallow the steady stream of new goods, but more people needed to become consumers. The two World Wars and the great mid-war Depression, however, put a strapping hold on an emergent consumerist mentality; in a society marked by scarcity and rationing, the possibilities for ordinary people to consume were indeed heavily restricted (Ewen, 1976/2001).

Yet with the 1950s, a new era began. Many things contributed to this shift and, again, the U.S. was propelling much of the developments. Consumers rather than producers were now made responsible for the prosperity of the nation, and the American society became described as a ‘Consumers Republic’,
inhabited by strong and sovereign consumers (Kroen, 2006). In the words of Ewen, the industrial expansion that came with the Keynesian doctrine ultimately resulted in “the cultivation of a consumer Eden” (1976/2001, p. 206). Thus, post-war economic politics served to democratize consumption to the extent that the average man and woman could spend money on things other than the most essential, and this, in turn, spurred the development of what Georg Ritzer (2005) calls the “new means of consumption”. During the 1960s and 1970s, home-shopping television, shopping malls, cybermalls, fast food restaurants, theme parks, cruise ships and similar settings would “allow, encourage, and even compel” people to consume and, Ritzer points out, even over-consume (2005, p. 2). In the same decades, the entertainment and media industries grew with rapid speed and with them the advertising industry. As argued by Gary Cross (2009), foundational to the new post-war economy was the expansion of the personal desire to acquire more than only the goods needed for one’s survival. “The driving force”, he explains, “was not in leveling but in simulating wants” (Cross, 2009, p. 340).

2.1.1 Stimulating wants: The changing status of advertising and brands

To Colin Campbell (2005), longing and day-dreaming are key features of contemporary consumer culture. To develop his argument, Campbell accounts for the relationship between satisfaction and pleasure in the modern society. Unlike utility or the capacity to provide satisfaction, he explains, pleasure “is not an intrinsic property of any object but is a type of reaction which humans commonly have when encountering certain stimuli (Campbell, 2005, p. 61). Thus, the argument goes, whilst we can achieve satisfaction of our needs only through the use of real objects, pleasure is something which we can gain by merely exposing ourselves to certain stimuli which we can experience through our senses. Hence, while we need to actually eat a meal to satisfy our hunger, merely the smell of it may be pleasurable. Even, Campbell argues, “an object’s pleasurable significance is a function of what it can be taken to be” (2005, p. 61, my emphasis). Thus, anticipation in itself – the wait for the meal – can be pleasurable and potentially even more pleasurable than the actual act of consuming it. What Campbell calls “imaginative anticipation” is thereby argued to be a crucial component of modern consumerism. In a society, in which the individual’s basic needs are secured, wanting has become more important than having, and the unknown – the new – is more highly valued than the known. This perspective, in turn, indeed helps explain the steady stream of products into the marketplace. Novelty and differentiation are required for persistent stimulation of our senses, or, as expressed by Campbell himself, “continual stimulation necessitates continual change” (2005, p. 61).
Indeed, the rise of modern consumer culture goes hand in hand with the development of the advertising industry. As part of the *marketing process*, and along with design and packaging, advertising aims at constituting a commodity as a useful and significant object, and at positioning it as superior in relation to other commodities on the market (Ryan, 1992, p. 195). The Industrial Revolution changed the nature of advertising by offering new means of communication, and in the early twentieth century the industry began to get truly institutionalized (Lury, 2004; Williams, 1980/2009). The purpose of advertising at this point in time was, as Arvidsson observes, to "discipline and reorganize" consumption, and the role of marketers was to create a set of needs and preferences in the minds of people (2006, p. 78). What was conceived of as an irrational and disorganized consumption pattern was to be replaced by a rational and modern one. Ultimately, advertising at this time was all about re-educating consumers and to impose the same kind of rational logic on consumption that already characterized the Taylorized production process (Arvidsson, 2006; see also Ewen, 1976/2001).

Of course, the development of marketing as a discipline took different roads in different countries and the maturity that characterized the business in American and British society would only later be reached in other parts of the world. However, by the 1950s and 1960s the world was catching up, which lead Theodor Levitt to write his manifesto for "a global marketing revolution" in 1960 (Lury, 2004, p. 22). This era saw not only a massive *increase* in marketing, but also, as Arvidsson (2006) points out, a *new kind* of marketing. Several factors contributed to this shift. Actual consumer patterns were transformed, due to improved standards of living and the surfacing of a culturally influential middle class. In addition to this, industrial overcapacity resulted in an urgent need to find new market niches, which ultimately increased the *differentiation* on the market. Furthermore, and as also stressed by Lury (2004), the development of the media market opened new spaces for advertising. Together, these factors spurred the advent of a new marketing paradigm.

What Arvidsson (2006) describes as the most significant cause of the shift, however, is the expansion of the business of *market research* that took place throughout the 1950s. With all the new information that this research offered, it became apparent that the consumption process was more complicated than previously realized. Pioneers such as Ernest Dichter and others at the Institute for Motivation Research revealed that people tend to use consumer goods not only for their function, but also as "tools for the construction of social relations, of a sense of self or of a context for life in general" (Arvidsson, 2006, p.
Hence, the non-material features of a product were discovered to be just as important, or even more so, than the material ones. These insights in turn made the concept of lifestyle a central principle of consumer behavior in the 1960s, and ultimately paved the way for the augmented status of brands in the minds of producers and consumers alike (Arvidsson, 2006b).

While brands as such are not new to contemporary society, the meaning of the term ‘brand’ has gone through a noteworthy transformation, as Arvidsson (2005) has also pointed out. If originally used by producers as ‘trademarks’ to guarantee the quality of a commodity, or to give a commodity an identity, marketers eventually began to talk about brands as something that are created in “the context of consumption” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 244) or in the mind of the consumer. Consequently, the task of affecting consumer ‘brand images’ in a preferred direction was understood as increasingly important, and this in turn gave weight to brand management as a particular branch of marketing. For, as explained by Arvidsson, brand management works precisely by “enabling or empowering the freedom of consumers so that it is likely to evolve in particular directions” (2005, p. 244, original emphasis), and aims at “building intertextual, physical and virtual spaces that pre-structure and anticipate the agency of consumers” (2005, p. 247). Thus, while brands permit consumers to make their own meanings to some extent, consumer agency is circumscribed by brand management techniques intended to direct the ways in which consumers use goods.

Importantly, the blurring of boundaries between production and consumption practices that the new meaning of brands signify had also an impact on the ways in which marketers began to think of the relationship between themselves and the consumers (Lury, 2004). Instead of regarding this as a ‘stimulus-response’ kind of connection, marketers now started to think of it as an ‘exchange’. This in turn had implications on the ways in which brands were now used strategically by companies. Most notably, from the 1970s and onwards, there was a shift from the branding of stand-alone-products to the branding of product-ranges (Lury, 2004, p. 25). After all, the trait of a brand is that it unites a range of goods and can be “extensively marketed so that something of its reputation rubs off onto every other commodity which bears its mark” (Ryan, 1992, p. 187).

### 2.1.2 Sign-value: Brands as communicators

The intensification of capitalism that began with the industrial revolution meant that the exchange value of goods came to outcompete use value as the most important kind of commodity value (Jansson, 2001). As explained by Featherstone
(1992), the notion of consumer culture emphasizes the dual relationship between economy and culture. Firstly, it points to the cultural dimension of the economy, which means that goods are used not only for their apparent use value but also as communicators. By this logic, when buying a pair of shoes, it is not enough that they are functional, but they must also say something about who we are (or want to be). Secondly, the term refers to the economy of cultural goods, that is, to the ways in which cultural goods, commodities and lifestyles are developed and adjusted to market principles, such as supply, demand, and competition. Of course, we could now argue that there has never been an economy without cultural elements or a culture free from economic thinking. Mundane things have always been bought or gained as cultural communicators just as cultural artifacts have always had economic value. However, what Featherstone (1992) argues is that the commodity as communicator, as sign, has become increasingly important in contemporary consumer culture. Having this function, commodities are recurrently being used to inform others about who we are, or who we want to be.

Evidently, this line of thinking is inspired by the works of both Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu. In The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures (1970/1998), Baudrillard argues that consumption is always communication, a language, through which we speak to others. Having written his book from a combined Marxist and a post-structuralist perspective, Baudrillard apparently uses linguistic concepts to describe the role of consumption and objects in society. Not satisfied with the Marxian notions of use value and exchange value, he introduces the idea of sign-value. To him, the true value of the commodity is as a sign – a message or image. This means that as consumers we must learn the language of consumption, the code, in order to know what and how to consume. And consumption, Baudrillard further argues, is not something we “do” in order to reach satisfaction, enjoyment or pleasure. Rather, we are forced into this system and have no option but to use it. What we look for in the system is difference, that is, we use the language of things to position ourselves among other people. Baudrillard explains this logic like this:

The principles of analysis remain as follows: you never consume the object itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status (1970/1998, p. 61).

Much of this reasoning is familiar also from the works of Bourdieu (cf. 1984; 1993b; 1996), who has famously shown how commodities become used as vehicles in the social and cultural reproduction of power and status (see also sec-
According to Bourdieu, a lot of the sacred or magical meanings connected to consumption practices derive from the use of *brand names* on clothing and other consumer products. By labeling an article, such as a dress or a costume, a fashion house seeks to make the garment rare, sought after, magic and legitimate. In other words, the brand name adds value to the product without changing it physically in any way – a process that Bourdieu (cf. 1993a) has described as *social alchemy*.

However, the magic of commodities is created not only through the *adding* of brand shimmer, but also through the *removal* of history and context of production, or through what Marx called *commodity fetishism*. As a consequence, “In everyday practice, the blessings of consumption are not experienced as resulting from work or from a production process; they are experienced as a *miracle*” (Baudrillard, 1970/1998, p. 31).

### 2.2 Perspectives on ‘convergence culture’

If the processes of production and consumption were “pushed apart” through the technological developments following on the Industrial Revolution two centuries ago, recent observations suggest that these processes are becoming increasingly intertwined again. Indeed, evidence of such a development can be spotted in our everyday lives. For example, notions such as ‘viral’, ‘peer-to-peer’ or ‘buzz’ marketing all imply that consumers act as producers and distributors of advertising messages. Likewise, customization campaigns urging us to design our own shoes, smart phones, or sofas also contribute to the blurring of boundaries between producer and consumer. Similarly, in the entertainment industry, dedicated users are increasingly drawn into the production process as some kind of “amateur expertise”, appreciated for their deep knowledge and fresh ideas (Deuze, 2007).

To Henry Jenkins (2006a), different kinds of consumer productivity, such as those exemplified above, are the result of years of accelerating media convergence, and central to what he calls *convergence culture*. Today, the concept of ‘convergence’ is commonly used both in the academic field and within the media industry to signify the constant restructuring of media companies as well as to describe the latest developments in, for example, media forms, distribution, and consumption. Despite its massive power of penetration, or perhaps because of it, no generally accepted definition of the concept has been proposed. Hence, what is meant by the concept varies depending on the context in which it is used (Appelgren, 2004; Lawson-Borders, 2006).
Nicholas Negroponte and Ithiel de Sola Pool have both been honored for introducing the idea of media convergence into media research (Lawson-Boarders, 2006; Appelgren, 2004). de Sola Pool touched upon the concept as he discussed the interdependence of various media in his book *Technologies of Freedom* (1983), whereas Negroponte presented his visions of the merging media technologies in *Being Digital* (1995). From there on, the convergence debate has continued and further attempts have been made in order to capture what it is all about. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (2000, p. 79), for example, have explained the concept of convergence by stressing that “the boundaries for what up until today have been separate areas of communications are now dissolving”. The result, they claim, is that we are now moving into “the era of convergence” (Golding & Murdock, 2000, p. 79).

To a large extent, Negroponte’s notion of convergence as well as Golding’s and Murdock’s account of the term put the development of media technologies and particularly digitization at the heart of the concept. This is perhaps not so surprising, as the Internet and multimedia technologies in general were often described in sharp contrast to the traditional, not so dynamic mass media (like the TV or the radio) in the late 1990s (Appelgren, 2004). Jenkins’s interest in convergence, however, is more related to its cultural impact and particularly to its consequences for the producer-consumer relationship and for audience behavior. “Convergence”, he claims, “alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” as well as “the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 16). Most importantly, Jenkins describes the concept as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 2, my emphasis). This description of cultural media convergence resonates with the structuring of my forthcoming theory chapters, which, as indicated, each has a focus on textual, industrial, and audience-related convergence, respectively.

Convergence culture, Jenkins (2006a) further explains, is inhabited by empowered, active consumers who are not satisfied with ready-made content, but want to produce their own. Therefore, he argues, convergence culture is at the same time a ‘participatory culture’, in which the producer and consumer identities truly become blurred, and in which consumers are particularly active. Consumers in this culture are not only capable and willing to produce their own media content by the help of new media technology; they are increasingly en-
couraged to do so, not least by the entertainment industries. As he explains, cultural convergence is both a “top-down corporate-driven process” and a “bottom-up consumer-driven process” (2006a, p. 18), bringing new opportunities to both media users and professionals. Much in line with Jenkins, Mark Deuze (2007) finds proof of convergence culture throughout the creative industries, from journalism to advertising and PR, and from film and television to the gaming industry. Like Jenkins, he also recognizes the benefits for both consumers and professionals in this convergence culture as it is said to bring new forms of “flexibility” and customization to both groups of agents. For the media industries, he also observes, participation may render “intensified relationships with consumers” as well as “new ways to foster consumer loyalty and engagement” (Deuze, 2007, p. 79). One of the most significant cultural consequences of convergence, then, according to both Jenkins and Deuze, is that the borders between those who produce and those who consume diminish, as both groups of agents engage in the same kind of creative activities. In fact, according to Deuze, in the contemporary participatory (media) culture these identities converge to the extent that we might need to “stop referring to our behavior towards media as either consumption or production” (2007, p. 38).

2.2.1 Prosumption, Web 2.0 and collective intelligence

As a review of the contemporary literature in the field reveals, ‘prosumption’ has become perhaps the most established term to refer to situations in which production and consumption become blurred, although it is sometimes accompanied by or used synonymously with related terminology such as ‘produsage’ (Tapscott & Williams, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; van Dijck, 2009; Beer & Burrows, 2010; Chu, 2010; Collins, 2010; Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The concept, which originates in Alvin Toffler’s The Third Wave (1980), has come to serve as a label for the active participant who acts concurrently as a producer and a consumer in the contemporary media environment (Chu, 2010). Employing the notion, Steve Collins (2010), for example, claims that a new wave of ‘prosumerism’ has surfaced due to recent developments within media technology. To Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), likewise, the producer-consumer convergence has gone as far as giving rise to a new kind of ‘prosumer capitalism’. While the authors do acknowledge that humans have always been involved in various kinds of prosumption practices, they also claim that the arrival of new, increasingly interactive, media technology (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are brought forwards as explicit examples of such technology) has given prosumption a more prominent position in today’s society.
Thus, as evident from above, it is common to ascribe the converging roles of producers and consumers to the arrival of the latest media technology, and in particular to what has become known as Web 2.0. While much disagreement still exists regarding the actual meaning of Web 2.0, there seems to be a general agreement that it would not exist without the participation of active users. Google, Flickr, Bit Torrent, Wikipedia, blogging, search engine optimization and tagging are mentioned by the inventor of the concept, Tim O’Reilly (2007), as typical Web 2.0 applications. As an attempt to summarize the shared attributes of these and other Web 2.0 applications, O’Reilly brings up the trusting of users as co-developers and the ‘harnessing of collective intelligence’ (2007). Now the concept of ‘collective intelligence’ refers to something much older than Web 2.0, or even Web 1.0. As noted in the MIT’s virtual “Handbook of collective intelligence” (itself being a materialization of this phenomena), what the term refers to – “groups of individuals doing things collectively that seem intelligent” – have existed as long as there have been humans (MIT Center for collective intelligence, 2012). However, as evidenced by O’Reilly’s (2007) mentioning of collective intelligence in a Web 2.0 context, the concept has proven fruitful to describe one of the most significant aspects of today’s Internet environment as well as of contemporary participatory culture at large. According to Pierre Lévy, who in the late 1990s introduced the term to refer to a form of “universally distributed intelligence”, this kind of intelligence is “constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills” (1997, p. 13).

More recently, the notion of collective intelligence has been taken as an emblem of the new convergent media culture, and an indication of increased consumer empowerment through new kinds of collaboration and participation (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 256; see also Jenkins, 2006b; Deuze, 2007). To Jenkins (2006a), the concept is especially apt to describe the new kinds of collaboration and participation enabled by media convergence. As he argues, one of the most significant consequences of convergence culture “may be the shift from individualized and personalized media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 255). Personal media, he argues, are currently being replaced by communal media, that is, “media that become part of our lives as members of communities” (2006a, p. 256). Collective intelligence to Jenkins then, refers to the ability of these, largely virtual, communities to host and distribute knowledge amongst the members (2006a, p. 27). These conclusions are supported by, among others, Deuze (2007), who similarly emphasizes the collaborative nature of networked media technology.
Thus, just like ICTs itself has been praised and made part of utopian vision of society, so has the prosumer culture which it has been claimed to spur. The mere title of Don Tapscott’s and Anthony Williams’ bestseller *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, published in 2006, is evidence of the revolutionary discourse often used to describe the current situation. According to the authors, new forms of “mass collaboration” will radically transform the ways businesses are run and the ways consumers interact with these, to the benefit of both companies and consumers (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 10). To some, these collaborative aspects of participatory culture represent a much welcomed counter-part to an otherwise increasingly commercial Internet (cf. Lévy, 1997; Deuze, 2007). While reminding us of the commercial contexts within which this type of collaboration commonly take place, Deuze (2007), for example, welcomes collective intelligence as a rival to traditional authority or expert systems. Following the same utopian lane, Kozinets and co-authors foresee that “With the diffusion of networking technologies, collective consumer innovation is taking on new forms that are transforming the nature of consumption and work, and, with it, society” (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Jensen, 2008, p. 339, quoted in Comor, 2011). However, although many seem to agree that things have changed in the relationship between professional producers and consumers, not all are as convinced about the profundity of these changes. Nor does everyone foresee the same positive developments as do the most certain proponents of prosumer culture. The following section will bring forth some highly legitimate critique against prosumption that has been raised over the last few years.

### 2.2.2 Critics of ‘prosumer culture’

According to Ashlee Humphreys and Kent Grayson (2008), much of the rhetoric around prosumption in general and its effects on the producer-consumer relationship are over-exaggerations. In their view, a fundamental change in the relationship between these parties occurs only when consumers begin to produce exchange value for companies. In order to understand this on a somewhat deeper level, Humphreys and Grayson (2008) suggest that we start thinking about what we really mean by the terms ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’, since the producer-consumer relationship has traditionally been thought of “as an exchange relationship in which each party trades one kind of value for another” (2008, p. 2). Using coffee as an example, they explain how we normally think about the two roles: “By conventional practice, the organization (or set of organizations) that grows, harvest, roasts, and sometimes grinds the beans is la-
beled the ‘producer’, whereas the person who brews the coffee in order to drink it is labeled the ‘consumer’” (2008, p. 3). However, as Humphrey and Grayson also point out, both producers and consumers “work” to create value in the cup of coffee. Therefore we cannot separate the two roles merely by claiming that the one (the producer) creates value while the other (the consumer) destroys value. Traditionally, though, producers and consumers have been producing different kinds of values: whilst the producer has primarily been interested in creating exchange value, the consumer’s interest has been in the use value of the commodity. As the authors observe, with all the talk about “co-creation” and “co-production”, it is easy to believe that the boundaries between producers and consumers cease to exist; that the roles totally converge. Yet, as they argue, “these practices do not have important theoretical implications until and unless consumers are asked to assist companies in creating exchange value” (Humphrey & Grayson, 2008, p. 6).

Humphrey and Grayson admit that consumers have been welcomed into the production process for a long time. It is not new, they acknowledge, that consumers take over steps in the value-chain; that is, that they work to finish a product or a service. We do this when we build our own IKEA furniture, cook a meal at home or design our own laptop. While these examples of ‘outsourcing’ to the customers may change the prices of the commodities or services, the consumer’s role remains largely the same. As explained by the authors: “If consumers are expending labor for personal benefit – for example, assembling their own desk or designing their own handbag – the results of the labor are not sold for exchange and are therefore not commoditized” (Humphrey & Grayson, 2008, p. 10). If, on the other hand, the activities undertaken by the consumers change the exchange value of a product or service, then true transformations take place:

To us, the true potential revolution in consumption/production is occurring in those increasingly frequent instances in which consumers are being asked – and often are willingly agreeing – to take over steps in the value chain that create exchange value. That is, they are helping companies to be more successful in the marketplace. This production of exchange value, we argue, is a fundamentally different process than the production of use value (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008, p. 11).

But then, when consumers become producers in the sense that they contribute to a commodity’s or service’s exchange value, who benefits from this development? “Is consumer input into the production process a net positive; does it reconnect the laborer with the products of his or her labor? Or, is it exploitation twice over, once the object is produced and twice when it is sold back for a
profit?”, Humphreys and Grayson ask (2008, p. 14). As the authors conclude, these matters raise important ethical questions concerning the gains of these developments for companies and customers respectively.

Also Edward Comor (2011) judges the effects of prosumption by considering whether it is use value or exchange value that is being co-created. The following quote is an apt summary of his argument:

For consumption activities to truly constitute a new direction in socio-economic relations – to, in effect, prioritize the creation and distribution of use-values – prosumers need to work/create primarily for their social or intrinsic needs rather than for exchange. Whether or not what is produced/co-created benefits the individual or the group (i.e. society or the corporation), if the purpose and result of consumer labor is the advancement of exchange values or profits, status quo relations will remain largely unchanged (Comor, 2011, p. 37).

Thus, according to Humphreys and Grayson (2008) as well as Comor (2011), prosumption needs to be evaluated against its real effects on the producer-consumer relationship. As they all argue, only seldom are changes in this relationship profound and only seldom do prosumer activities truly challenge the existing order.

If the critique above primarily rests on theoretical grounds, others have found reasons to question prosumption on the basis of various empirical studies. According to Donna Chu (2010), for instance, there is today little empirical support for claims that consumers take on a more active role in the new media landscape. Having investigated how young people in China make use of the Internet, Chu concludes that the potential prosumers in reality remain rather passive consumers. Similar conclusions are reached also by José van Dijck (2009), who has found that of all users of user-generated media platforms (such as MySpace, Facebook or YouTube), a majority are ‘passive spectators’ or ‘inactives’. Therefore, she argues, “it’s a great leap to presume that the availability of digital networked technologies turns everyone into active participants” (2009, p. 44). For Göran Bolin, in turn, it is crucial that we ask questions not only about the opportunities of consumer activity but also about its “limits” (2010b, p. 78). His case studies of two Swedish, televised, multiplatform productions, indicate that the extent to which consumers contribute to the production of media texts must not be overestimated. The findings of these and similar studies thus give further weight to David Morley’s warning that, despite a tendency within particularly the cultural studies tradition to do so, we must not “mistake audience activity for power” (2006, p. 115).
2.3 Positioning of thesis in relation to previous research

If the previous section of this chapter aimed at providing a contextualization of my area of study by placing it into a context of contemporary consumer/brand culture and convergence culture, this section aims to position the thesis further in relation to earlier research and relevant academic traditions. Certainly, there are numerous approaches to analyzing the entertainment industries, their texts and their audiences, and the relationships involved (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). However, as the previous chapter indicated, two approaches have been particularly influential on my study: cultural studies and political economy. These two academic traditions sometimes still come across as radically opposed in academic texts. According to Graham Murdock, the contemporary situation, with its division of scholarly labor into political economy and cultural studies, has given rise to what he considers to be an academic apartheid; that is, a situation in which the doors between the two schools of thought are often closed (1995, p. 90). Indeed, some scholars argue that the differences between the two traditions are too great to allow integration (cf. Fiske, 1994; Grossberg, 1995; Carey, 1995). John Fiske, for instance, asserts that political economy and cultural studies constitute two such different spheres of academic work that they demand their “own methodologies and theoretical frameworks” (Fiske, 1994, p. 469).

Others, on the contrary, emphasize the similarities between, or common grounds of, political economy and cultural studies and acknowledge that they should, and indeed sometimes do, intersect (cf. Mosco, 1996; Garnham, 1997; Kellner, 1997). In his solid account of the history and potential future for a political economy of communications, Vincent Mosco (1996) argues for more porous borders between the two schools of thought. Certainly, the contributions made by both traditions of cultural analysis to the development of media and communication studies cannot be underestimated, and as argued in the previous chapter, it is my conviction that both cultural studies and political economy can productively shed light on single research projects, including my own. The next sections will clarify my theoretical foundation in cultural studies and political economy and explain the value of integrated perspectives further.

2.3.1 A ‘multiperspectival’ study of culture

As noted in the introductory chapter, my research area and subject of study require a cultural studies approach. In particular, my study rests upon previously developed insights into practices and cognitive processes carried out by ‘active audiences’. This means that my study includes theory either directly built or inspired by pioneering audience analysts such as Stuart Hall (cf. 1980/1973), Dick
Hebdige (cf. 1979/1988), David Morley (cf. 1980), Michael de Certeau (cf. 1984), Ien Ang (cf. 1985), Janice Radway (cf. 1987), John Fiske (cf. 1989, 1992, 1997), Lawrence Grossberg (cf. 1992), and Henry Jenkins (cf. 1992b, 2006a, 2006b). This line of research – and beyond – is mainly given space in Chapter 5, ‘World-building by fans’. While diverse in argumentations and foci, what these scholars have in common is a trust in the audiences’, or media consumers’, abilities to resist or at least negotiate dominant meanings, either cognitively or by practice. Michael de Certeau (1984), for example, concurs with Douglas and Isherwood (1996) as he presents consumption as an area of ‘struggle’ in which consumers resist domination by using and appropriating cultural goods. Through these consumer ‘tactics’, the consumer also becomes a producer, “making-do” with cultural resources and opposing the dominant calculated ‘strategies’. Although the dominant rules the production of cultural forms, the ‘weak’ can never be fully controlled. These ideas of have later been elaborated by both Fiske and Jenkins.

Like de Certeau, and inspired also by Stuart Hall, Fiske, for instance, has theorized on the audience’s competencies to create diverse meanings out of otherwise streamlined texts. He identifies a significant gap between the economic interests of the cultural industries (‘the power bloc’) and audience reception, and goes as far as to declare that “Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry” (Fiske, 1989a, p. 24). Ultimately, this creates 'semiotic democracy' as well as brings pleasure to ‘the people’, as they enjoy both to be productive and to practice resistance. While Fiske and de Certeau have legitimately been criticized for romanticizing popular culture and downplaying the powers of the dominant, their work has had a significant impact on the development of audience studies in general and fan studies in particular. Jenkins not least in his analyses of fan culture, has been explicitly influenced by de Certeau’s notion of productive audiences as ‘poachers’, but obviously also by Fiske’s analyses of the popular. Other researchers also drawing on this theoretical heritage, explicitly or implicitly and to greater or lesser extents, include audience and/or text analysts like Camille Bacon-Smith (cf. 1992), Nancy Baym (cf. 1998; 2000), Jonathan Gray (cf. 2006; 2010), and Cornel Sandvoss (cf. 2011). As a later chapter of this thesis will show, Sandvoss, for example, has introduced Fiske’s typology of fan productivity to the area of media convergence.

The cultural studies tradition has added new dimensions to our understandings of the popular and of the relationship between industry and audiences. However, a general critique of de Certeau, Fiske, Jenkins and other scholars associated with the cultural studies tradition, is that, in their eagerness to con-
trdoublequote; the earlier “cultural dupe” paradigm – underpinned by the Frankfurt school theory – they went too far in the other direction. They became too celebrative in their presentations of the active audience and of popular culture in general, and, consequently, too apologetic of the operations of the cultural industries. While praising the power of the consumer, the powers of the industry became largely neglected. Such critique has, for instance, been launched by Jim McGuigan (1997), Nicholas Garnham (1995), Todd Gitlin (1997) and Nick Stevenson (2002).

Objections have also been made by Douglas Kellner, who in a constructive manner pledges for what he calls “a multiperspectival cultural studies” (1997, p. 102); that is, a cultural studies approach that combines insights derived from cultural studies with those offered by political economy. What he argues is that the “analysis of audience uses of media texts is enhanced by an understanding of the political economy of the media and of how media culture is produced and distributed within specific systems of production” (Kellner, 1997, p. 112). In developing this argument, Kellner explains how Fiske’s (1989) analysis of pop artist Madonna – carried out in a “typical” cultural studies manner with an emphasis on consumer power and ultimately resistance – could be made more complete by the addition of a political economist perspective that considers the mode of production as well as the marketing context in which the artist has become created. Thus, according to Kellner, Fiske’s image of Madonna as a provoking rebel should be perfected with an image of her as cultural commodity, sold through extensive promotion. By analyzing Transformers in relation to its production and marketing contexts, this thesis employs an approach to culture that is in line with Kellner’s suggestion.

2.3.2 Contributions from political economy: The processes of commodification and spatialization

It seems that in our alleged ‘participatory’ or ‘prosumer’ culture especially, it would be of paramount importance to analyze different forms of cultural production in relation to one another. If in this thesis the cultural studies tradition contributes with valuable clues as to how the Transformers brand world becomes produced by active consumers, the political economy perspective allows me to understand the same brand world as the result of industry production. In this thesis, therefore, theory on audience activity and productivity is complemented with theory on the contemporary entertainment industry. The latter branch of theory (mainly elaborated in my Chapter 4, “World-building by industry”) includes perspectives on two fundamental processes which largely affect how brand worlds like Transformers come to exist and evolve: ‘commodification’ and
'spatialization'. Both processes, along with 'structuration', have been identified by Mosco (1996) as significant entry-points into a political economy analysis of culture.

**Commodification**, “the process of transforming use values into exchange values” (Mosco, 1996, p. 141), is certainly at the heart of the industrial making of brand worlds such as Transformers, as content is being translated into a growing bulk of saleable commodities. Diversification of product lines and the expansion of the commodity form are essential processes in the building and promoting of transmedial entertainment, as this thesis will also show. In his account of commodification, Mosco (1996) criticizes cultural studies analysts such as Fiske (1989) and Ang (1985) for having over-emphasized the audience as ‘co-producers’ of cultural texts at the expense of complementary perspectives. These scholars, he explains, are:

correct in pointing to the co- or mutual constitution of media products, but they neglect to situate this within a structure of decision-making that places in the hands of capital most, though not all, of the levers on control over decision-making processes regarding production, distribution and exchange (Mosco, 1996, p. 149).

An increasingly significant part of the commodification process is also consumer surveillance, as this activity potentially produces information that may go into the production of new, and all the more customized and niche targeted, commodities (Mosco, 1996). Building on Dallas Smythe (1994) and his account of “the audience commodity” as the main commodity within the media system, contemporary scholars such as Mark Andrejevic (cf. 2004; 2005; 2007; 2009) and José van Dijck (2009) have raised our awareness of the growing importance of, and opportunities to, monitoring in the Internet era. Equally, commodification also includes commercialization; a narrower process that specifically refers to the creation of relationships between the audience and the advertisers (Mosco, 1996).

**Spatialization** then – a term usually accredited to Henri Lefebvre (1974) and a theoretical concept further advanced in the works of, for example, Scott Lash and John Urry (1987), Anthony Giddens (1990) and Manuel Castells (1989) – is described by Mosco as “the process of overcoming the constrains of space and time in social life” (1996, p. 173). Two reasons are offered by Mosco as to why spatialization is important to a political economy of communication: firstly, communication and media technologies are central to the process, and secondly, spatialization is particularly significant to the communication industries as companies expand their powers through horizontal and vertical forms of integration plus through various forms of strategic partnerships. In this thesis, pro-
cesses of spatialization, like those of commodification and commercialization, are accounted for theoretically (see Chapter 4, ‘World-building by industry’) as well as empirically as I describe the corporate infrastructure upon which the Transformers brand world is being built and promoted.

Ultimately, in seeking to understand cultural production as both audience activity and as industrial practice, including processes of commodification and spatialization, my study inescapably comes to include both micro-perspectives (focusing on affect, interpersonal communication, the experiences of individual persons or groups of persons, etc.) and macro-perspectives (focusing instead on industrial infrastructures, ownership, intra- and inter-industrial partnerships, etc.). In this way, my study would meet both Kellner’s (1997) call for a more “multiperspectivally” oriented cultural studies and Mosco’s (1996) request for research balancing between micro and macro perspectives on culture. This, in turn, allows for an analysis that considers the role of both agency and structure in the production of culture. On that note, then, it is impossible to circumvent Pierre Bourdieu and his conceptual work (cf. 1984, 1986; 1993b; 1996). As I hope the subsequent section will make clear, by paying equal attention to structure and agency when explaining how social hierarchies of taste become (re-)produced, as well as by clarifying the interdependence between economy and culture, Bourdieu’s work can serve as a useful mediator in any study that integrates perspectives from cultural studies and political economy.

2.3.3 Intermediating perspectives: The ‘economy’ of culture

Pierre Bourdieu – along with Jean Baudrillard – was referred to earlier in this chapter, as I sought to explain the function of commodities and brands as markers of difference or distinction, as means to establish social status. In reading culture as a site in which various forms of ‘capital’ are ‘accumulated’ and ‘invested’, Bourdieu has equipped us with new concepts for analyzing culture and for understanding the connections between the economic and the cultural. As this section will make evident, his work has been highly inspirational for researchers investigating the traits of popular culture in general and of fan culture in particular. A review of some of this literature, along with an assessment of Bourdieu’s original work, provides suggestions on how his ideas may apply to a study of the relationships underpinning the Transformers brand.

Bourdieu’s main ideas about and evidence of consumption as a vehicle for social positioning is most readily presented in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984; see also e.g. Bourdieu, 1996; 1993b). In this work, and with the help of the highly integrated notions of ‘capital’, ‘habitus, and ‘field’
Bourdieu develops a model that ultimately explains how power structures become reproduced and naturalized in society, or in ‘social space’. Through survey data gathered from French citizens of different ages, genders and socio-economic backgrounds, he here makes manifest the correspondence between ‘tastes’ and values on the one hand and social position on the other.

The notion of \textit{capital} is crucial to Bourdieuan theory. His model of social space is structured along two axes: one which presents the \textit{amount} of capital and another that reveals the \textit{form} of that capital, which may be either \textit{economic} or \textit{cultural}. Whereas economic capital refers to monetary wealth, cultural capital – as a form of \textit{symbolic} capital – consists of the acquaintance with, understanding of, or use of cultural goods. Elsewhere in his work, Bourdieu introduces the notion of \textit{social} capital, by which he refers to social ties and networks, or in his words, to “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network or more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (1986, p. 248). What Bourdieu concludes in \textit{Distinction} (1984) is that the symbolic forms of capital are as unequally distributed across social classes as is economic capital. However, even within the group possessing the highest levels of capital – and power – in society, there are differences as to how this capital is being dispersed over the suggested categories of capital; that is, its composition.

If the notion of capital is indispensable for understanding Bourdieu’s arguments, the concept of \textit{habitus} is equally important. Ultimately, due to differences in social origin and educational level, which Bourdieu stresses as particularly determinative, an executive and an academic will have different habitus, which in turn renders different lifestyles and expressions of taste. More than anything, it is the notion of habitus that highlights the interplay of economy and culture – and of structure and agency – in Bourdieu’s sociology. For, at the same time that our habitus functions as sort of a mental map, informing our actions and interpretations of the world, it is simultaneously deeply rooted in prevailing social structures, and not least, in social class.

A third core concept is \textit{field}, which Bourdieu refers to a system of social relations in which agents struggle over positions. Ultimately, an agent’s habitus and accumulated capital, along with the properties or rules of a particular field, determine the agent’s position within a field. Forms of capital, however, are evaluated differently within different fields. Cultural competence in the form of popular culture knowledge is, for example, highly evaluated in the field of the popular, or as Bourdieu terms it, ‘counter’ culture, yet less so in the field of legitimate arts, where other kinds of cultural competence are valued instead. Consequent-
ly, mobility between fields would not happen effortlessly, but always at a “cost” in terms of lost competence (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 86). Within a field though, positions are never fixed. Rather, as the idea of power struggles suggest, they are negotiable and cultural consumption presents itself as a crucial means by which to exceed, reproduce, or resist social standing. Ultimately, the dominating and the dominated bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeoisie, and the working-classes struggle over which tastes and practices should be considered legitimate, and thereby also what should be valued as cultural capital. The possibilities of capital conversion – that is, the ability of one form of capital to transform into another – is an important factor when considering the value of cultural capital. To Bourdieu, the educational system is central to the conversion of symbolic forms of capital into economic.

Given the penetrative power of Bourdieu’s intellectual heritage, it is not strange to find that it has also been critiqued. As noted by Erling Bjurström, for example, Bourdieu has been criticized for using the concept of capital much too vaguely and without consideration of cultural contexts, and – rather unfairly – for nurturing the presumption that all individuals are calculating and rational in their struggle to accumulate capital (1997, p. 191). While at least the last line of critique can be said to derive from an unfortunate misunderstanding of Bourdieu’s work,¹ he has more legitimately been condemned for overstating reproduction and for neglecting forces of change in his analyses of culture. As indicated, however, despite such criticism Bourdieuan theory has also been vividly used within popular culture, subculture, or fandom theory. Hitherto, numerous studies within these research areas have – to various extents and with different reservations – drawn on his work as an analytical point of departure (cf. Fiske, 1992; Thornton, 1995; Bjurström, 1997; Brown, 1997; Cole, 2011; Smith, 2011). However, as acknowledged by Bjurström (1997), the extent to which Bourdieuan theory can be applied to popular forms of culture – which Transformers is an example of – is questionable. After all, Bourdieu did make analyses of ‘legitimate’ culture rather than of popular culture, which in turn implies that the notion of cultural capital really cannot be used outside of its original context. As Bjurström reminds us, “according to Bourdieu’s theory it is almost contra-

¹ Arguably, rather than proposing the idea that all individuals are driven by rationality and calculation, Bourdieu stresses the automaticity by which power structures become reproduced. Besides, Bourdieu invalidates this critique by explicitly stating that despite his use of economic terms, such as ‘investment’, “it is in no way suggested that the corresponding behavior [of an agent, author’s adding] is guided by rational calculation of maximum profit” (1984, p. 88). Or, as he further explains: “The art-lover knows no other guide than his love of art, and when he moves, as if by instinct, towards what is, at each moment, the thing to be loved [...] he is not pursuing a cynical calculation, but his own pleasure, the sincere enthusiasm which, in such matters, is one of the preconditions of successful investment” (1984, p. 86).
diction in terms to regard any kind of popular culture as symbolic or as cultural capital. The culture that is elevated to cultural capital loses by definition its character as popular culture” (1997, p. 476, my translation).

Importantly, though, this circumstance has not prevented culture analysts to apply Bourdieu’s theory to the popular, and with some thought-provoking results too. Indeed, Bjurström himself makes extensive use of the notion of cultural capital in relation to his analyses of Swedish youth styles, presented in Högt och Lågt: Smak och Stil i Ungdomskulturen (1997), albeit without distorting the original meaning of the term. Among those who have sought to revise Bourdieu’s conceptual toolbox in a more elaborate fashion is John Fiske. Already his idea of popular culture as a ‘site of struggle’ for positions reveals a dependency on Bourdieu’s work. Fiske’s article ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’ (1992) is among the most widely recognized endeavors to apply Bourdieu’s economistic model to popular culture. In this work, Fiske makes explicit use of Bourdieu’s conceptual toolbox, including the notions of capital and habitus, to explain the power struggles of fans vis-à-vis the industry. As a motivation to his own work in the article, he begins by criticizing Bourdieu for what he considers to be two major flaws in his theory. The first critique is that Bourdieu fails to take into account social positions other than class in his analyses, when he could also have considered, for example, gender, sex, ethnicity or age, while the second concerns precisely Bourdieu’s inattentiveness to power struggles taking place outside of or even against legitimate culture; that is, within the sphere of popular culture.

As a remedy of the second of these “defects”, Fiske presents extensions of Bourdieu’s concepts, including the notion of popular cultural capital, which also reappears in the author’s later writings (cf. Fiske, 1997b, p. 314ff). This term is introduced as a label for the cultural capital of the disempowered, consisting of the meanings and pleasures which allow people to resist forces of domination and dominant ideology. Ultimately, popular culture capital comprises a value system of its own and forms a “bottom-up” type of social power. In addition, Fiske also introduces the notion of fan cultural capital, as a special type of popular cultural capital, although the boundaries between the concepts remain rather indistinct. Both forms of capital, according to Fiske, are generally produced in opposition to official cultural capital, yet they differ in relation to the Bourdieuan notion of capital conversion. Whereas popular culture capital can never

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2 English translation: High and Low: Taste and Style in Youth Culture.
convert into economic capital, Fiske argues, fan cultural capital can at times go through such a process of transition.

Fiske’s extensions of Bourdieu’s terms can, in turn, be placed in relation to Sarah Thornton’s notion of subcultural capital, which she develops in relation to analyses of more or less “underground” English club cultures (1995, p. 11). Dissatisfied with Bourdieu’s neglect of the role of the media in the circulation of symbolic capital, Thornton sets out to correct this failing in Club Cultures: Music Media and Subcultural Capital (1995). Her analyses indicate that, whereas non-mainstream media like fanzines potentially raise the value of subcultural capital, the mass media, conversely, drain this type of capital of its value by “selling out” the subcultural to “outsiders”. Thus, like Fiske’s notions of popular and fan cultural capital, subcultural capital is presented as a form of capital that gains its value by not being legitimate or high-brow cultural capital. However, as Thornton also points out, the lines between mainstream and niche media are not razor sharp. Rather, the former tend to form the content of the latter to an extent that is seldom acknowledged in fan literature. In relation to this, Thornton makes the important recognition that:

conversations between friends about clubs often involve flyers seen, radio heard and features read. Rather than an unadulterated grassroots medium, word-of-mouth is often extended by or is an extension to other communications’ media. For this reason, club organizers, like other marketers and advertisers, actively seek to generate word-of-mouth with their promotions (1995, p. 138).

This finding, in turn, inspires Thornton to conclude that subcultures become not only covered by the media but also constructed by these.

Despite their innovativeness and impact on fan culture theory, both Fiske’s (1992) and Thornton’s (1995) appropriations of Bourdieu’s model have been criticized. Of special interest here is the critique that highlights the implications of introducing subdivisions of cultural capital – in the ways that both Fiske and Thornton do – to our understanding of the relationship between the popular and the ‘official’ on the one hand, and between fans and industry on the other. As Bjurström also points out, both Fiske and Thornton present popular-, fan-, or subcultural capital as something that becomes produced outside of or even in direct opposition to official cultural capital. As later parts of this thesis will suggest, such a view is problematic not least because it neglects the extent to which fan culture is dependent upon official, or commercial, culture as well as the degrees to which “high” and “low” forms of culture tend to blend. In relation to Fiske’s claim that popular culture capital can never be converted into economic capital, Bjurström makes an important point as he declares that “it is precisely
this type of conversion that lies at the core of the cultural industry’s interest in popular culture” (1997, p. 476). Indeed, Bjurström even criticizes Bourdieu himself for his general disinterest in processes of mediatization and commodification – processes that, as pointed out by both Mosco (1996) and Kellner (1997), are crucial to the making of contemporary culture. Matt Hills, in Fan Cultures (2002), is equally skeptical of Fiske’s modification of the notion of capital as well as his ideas about capital conversion. Recognizing processes of commodification in relation to fan culture, he presents several examples of situations in which popular cultural capital may in fact transform into economic capital (such as when a fan gets employed thanks to his skills or knowledge, or when fans start up niche magazines).

Against this background, how then may Bourdieuan theory be of value to my study of the relationships underpinning the Transformers brand world? Besides having inspired a number of the theorists whose work will be presented and integrated in my subsequent chapters, Bourdieu – by making clear the interdependence between economy and culture on the one hand, and between structure and agency on the other – reminds me of the necessity of being open-minded and non-exclusive in my approach to my object of study. Although my research design shows little resemblance to his, largely survey-based, investigations, Bourdieu’s works motivate my choice to study Transformers in a full-circuit fashion and especially as a system of relations between positions; between industry and fans, and between the texts produced by both of these groups of agents. Although I have chosen not to make individual Transformers fans’ socio-economic backgrounds part of my investigation (see Chapter 6, ‘Methodological approach’), it is clear that two main class fractions are significantly apparent in my study: the legal owners and producers of the Transformers brand vis-à-vis the brand consumers or fans. Needless to say, these groups of agents are differently positioned on the social map and in control of different amounts and forms of capital. In this context, another innovative re-interpretation of Bourdieuan theory should be mentioned. Sunny S. K. Lam (2010) employs the notion of global corporate cultural capital to account for the brand equity and cultural symbols possessed by the Walt Disney conglomerate, thereby finding new areas of use for the Bourdieuan terminology. Having investigated the promotion of Disneyland, he finds that this corporate cultural capital has a negative impact on creativity in cultural production and largely determines the company’s communication and strategies.

Thus, Bourdieu serves as a mediator of perspectives in this thesis as well as contributes to my forthcoming analyses. In particular, the notion of ‘capital
conversion’ – as employed by Bourdieu as well as by followers within the fields of popular or fan theory – is relevant to any study interested in aspects of ‘fan labor’. Indeed, in order to broaden our understanding of this phenomenon, it would be fruitful to assess the extent to which fan knowledge or skills may actually be converted into fiscal wealth for the fans themselves and for an entertainment industry that seems increasingly eager to find forms to capitalize on such free ‘prosumer’ work. Somewhat surprisingly, neither Fiske nor Hills mention that processes of capital conversion may be initiated when fans, in various ways, participate in brand promotion activities. As some have pointed out, Bourdieu’s idea of capital conversion needs to be reassessed, especially in a time were producer and consumer identities become blurred (cf. Cole, 2011). And indeed, as indicated earlier in this chapter and as forthcoming chapters shows further (see especially Chapter 5, ‘World-building by fans’), a growing body of research does acknowledge ‘prosumption’ as a potential source of economic capital for companies. This issue will be addressed further in this thesis when I theoretically explore the concept of fan labor, and not least as I discuss my own results in the light of Bourdieu’s conceptual framework.

2.3.4 Recognizing the ‘contradictions’ of fan culture and the need of full-circuit studies

At this point, it can be stated that recognizing fandom as both economy and culture also requires recognizing the contradictory nature of fan culture. Janice Peck, in her insightful contribution to the debate, locates the schism between cultural studies and political economy precisely to the incapacity, of both parties, to resolve a foundational problem: “how to think the relation between something labeled ‘the economic’ and another thing designed as ‘the cultural’” (2006, p. 93). As she holds, treating these areas as completely separate will get us nowhere. Much in line with Peck’s argument, a number of researchers have recently begun to emphasize the “contradictory” nature of fan culture (cf. Hills, 2002; Moor, 2007; Théberge, 2005). Matt Hills (2002), again, is dissatisfied with what he calls decisionist narratives; that is, theoretical perspectives which, due to matters of politics, present fan culture as either “good” or “bad”. Such perspectives, he claims, have been promoted by, for example, Fiske, who ultimately – in conjunction with other fan scholars, like Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) – “pits ‘good’ popular culture capital against ‘bad’ economic capital” (Hills, 2002, p. 63). Indeed, Abercrombie’s and Longhurst’s (1998) scale on audience activity, ranging from ‘consumers’ at the one end of the spectra, via ‘fan’, ‘enthusiast’ and ‘cultist’, to ‘petty producer’ in the other, inevitably creates the kind of ‘moral dualism’ that Hills wishes to abolish. What he sympathetically wants
to replace these troublesome perspectives with is a ‘dialectic of value’, which acknowledges the simultaneously economic and cultural underpinnings of fan culture. Similar visions have been presented also by Liz Moor (2007), who equally urges us to move away from too simplistic descriptions of fan culture. As she reminds us, whereas consumption is habitually portrayed as “essentially antithetical to culture rather than as part of how it is constituted” (2007, p. 135), fan culture is always also material culture in which items are selected, adopted and incorporated into everyday life.

Sharing with these and like-minded scholars the conviction that resisting simplistic narratives about fan culture – or popular culture at large – is the only way to move forward in our analyses, my search for relevant theory has by necessity led me to literature that deals with both cultural production, cultural texts, and cultural consumption – separately or, at best, in integrated ways. Since the 1960s, when both a political economy of communication and the cultural studies tradition began to develop seriously, the “holy trinity” of media studies – production, text and consumption – has been subject to much research. With surprisingly few exceptions though, much of this research has kept its focus on one or perhaps two of the components of the cultural circuit at the time. Hence, on the one side of the spectrum, we find studies which explore the products of the entertainment industry from mainly a text- and/or consumption-oriented perspective (cf. Hebdige, 1979/1988; Morley, 1980; de Certeau, 1984; Ang, 1985; Radway, 1987; Fiske, 1989; 1992; 1997a; 1997b; Liebes & Katz, 1993). Into this line of research we can also place work more or less specialized in ‘fan culture’ (cf. Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; 2006b; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Baym, 1998; 2000; Brooker, 2002; Sandvoss, 2011). On the other side of the spectrum, we find instead studies which analyze entertainment, and fandom, mainly from a text- and/or production-oriented perspective (cf. Meehan, 1991; Kinder, 1991; Kline, 1993; Wasko, 1994; 2001; Pecora, 1998; Marshall, 2002; Lash & Lury, 2008). Whilst the first branch of research has emphasized cultural consumption at the expense of cultural production, the reverse is true of the second.

The subsequent theoretical chapters acknowledge and integrate important contributions from each branch of research. Here we can conclude that only a comparatively small number of studies have aimed for full-circuit analyses in which the entire cultural circuit is being empirically researched. These types of studies do, however, exist. One example is Göran Bolin’s and Michael Forsman’s work Bingolotto: Produktion, Text, Reception3 (2002), in which a popular

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3 English translation: Bingolotto: Production, Text, Reception.
televised game-show is analyzed from a holistic perspective. The purpose of the study is said to “build an understanding of Bingolotto as a phenomenon in its societal and cultural context, and to gain insights into the mechanisms connected to TV production and reception in the contemporary Swedish media geography” (2002, p. 10; my translation). Through interviews with TV-producers and audiences, participant observations from audience members’ homes, text-analyses of the show itself and other procedures, Bolin and Forsman draw a comprehensive picture of this popular culture phenomenon. In its approach to culture, Bolin’s and Forsman’s study resembles the educational case-study analysis of the *Sony Walkman*-commodity, conducted by Paul du Gay et al. In *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (1997), the writers argue for the necessity to analyze the whole “circuit of culture” – by which they mean the five processes of ‘representation’, ‘identity’, ‘production’, ‘consumption’ and ‘regulation’ – in order to understand a popular culture phenomenon fully. Other contributions offer holistic perspectives on entertainment brands in the form of anthologies, such as Joseph Tobin’s *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (2004), Christopher Lindner’s *The James Bond Phenomenon: a Critical Reader* (2003) and Pearson’s and Uriccio’s *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media* (1991). Another interesting case in this context is Janet Wasko’s, Mark Phillip’s and Eileen R. Meehan’s anthology *Dazzled by Disney?: The Global Disney Audiences Project* (2001) in which Disney is approached not only as business and text but also from an audience perspective. These and similar publications provide valuable insights into contemporary culture by virtue of the number of authors and different perspectives.

### 2.3.5 Inherent challenges and possible contributions

Positioning a study in an academic landscape is always coupled with some concerns. By aligning with both cultural studies and political economist-oriented perspectives, I certainly run the risk of being “attacked” from two directions. Political economists might accuse me of being too limited in my analyses of economy and the conditions of production, whereas cultural studies scholars might criticize me for making superficial text or audience analyses, for instance. Combining these perspectives means that I cannot go as deeply into each of them as I could have done if my focus had been on production only, text only or consumption only. However, it is my hope that my research will be appreciated for the knowledge yielded, and for its methodological relevance of doing something which is seldom done. Complex cultural phenomena require a multiperspectival approach, not least because audience activity has the potential to cre-
ate both cultural and economic values, as it takes place in both economic and cultural contexts (cf. Meehan, 2000). It would be a mistake to presume that fandom, for example, constitutes little more than a product of clever marketing thus neglecting its importance to individual partakers. Conversely, it would also be a mistake to ignore the commercial context in which fandom generally occurs, and its importance to brand owners. For obvious, any attempt to try to “measure” these values against each other as more or less “important” is doomed to fail.

As my theoretical chapters will argue, it could even be claimed that the economic value of audience activity demands that cultural value is also created. This was recognized by industry professionals long ago, and this would explain why viral marketing, for instance, is so attractive these days. Marketers have noticed that consumers willingly entertain themselves by creating various kinds of branded content to share with others (cf. Marshall, 2002). Thus, as long as it is considered “fun”, consumers don’t mind working. Writing in the pre-Web 2.0 era, Meehan (2000, p. 79) points to this convergence of labor and play as a necessary element of contemporary capitalism: “Within lived experience, leisure is obviously connected to consuming entertainment. Going to the movies or watching television or renting a video or going on-line are constructed as leisure – as fun, not work.” Hence, what needs to be understood is that audience activity can be both play and work, both enjoyed and exploited, and both economic and cultural. Until this is recognized to a greater extent within contemporary media research, the field will suffer from a major weakness.

My own contribution in this context includes an analysis of Transformers as simultaneously a site of pleasure, resistance and exploitation, which is made possible through my multi-perspectival approach to my object of study and which indicates the complexities and contradictions that such brand worlds involve, including the ambiguous relationship between producers and consumers. Considering both cultural and economic aspects, this thesis adds to our knowledge on how different types of value are interconnected within the frames of transmedial entertainment, and how power may be manifested.

The societal relevance of the thesis is linked to the project’s underlying questions. How do we understand the producer-consumer relationship in the contemporary media and consumer culture? What are the social and cultural consequences of media convergence – for industry and audiences? What do producers and consumers gain from investing in today’s global, transmedial entertainment brands? What happens when these all-encompassing brands come to dominate our own and our children’s relationship to mediated entertainment?
These are complicated questions that demand extensive research to be satisfactory answered. My thesis does not claim to provide the answers, but to shed light on some of the grounds for posing them.
3 Transmedial worlds of entertainment

When bringing home an action figure from a contemporary toy store, you potentially bring home a small piece of a “world” of entertainment. It is likely that your recently purchased plastic doll is but one component out of many within a universe made up of captivating stories and inhabited by spellbinding characters. It is also likely that your toy wears the same logotype as a range of more or less related commodities. Today’s fictional stories and characters are commonly materialized in hundreds of differentiated commodities, spread across a range of product categories and media platforms – ultimately due to the processes of commodification and spatialization through which use values are turned into exchange values and corporate interests become extended (Mosco, 1996). Digitalization allows for media content to travel effortlessly between one format and another, and branding strategies encourage a constant stream of new commodities for sale. As a result of such practices – where media become things and things become media (Lash & Lury, 2008) – these worlds of entertainment are in constant growth. Bed sheets, towels, video games, key rings, pencils, T-shirts, masquerade costumes, candy, web sites, DVDs, rubber gums, rug-sacks, ring tones, music albums, collector’s cards, board games, stickers and similar elements constitute them.

At first sight, the bulk of commodities and imagery that make up these worlds of entertainment might seem jumbled. However, as this chapter will make clear, these worlds are not as messy or randomly created as they might appear. Rather, they are carefully orchestrated by the involved companies to maximize profit. Ultimately, every extension serves a double purpose; 1) to generate revenue by being sold as goods on the consumer market, and; 2) to form a lucrative web of promotion (Wernick, 1991). In such a web, more or less obvious connections are created between all the products involved. Thus, while all of these products are being sold and bought as products in their own right, they are also fashioned to ‘cross-fertilize’ one another. The key goal is to create a world that to the consumers is more than the sum of its parts.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework for understanding these worlds as progressively more intricate webs of commodities and advertising. As I will suggest, in order to make sense of these ostensibly chaotic webs of promotion, the concepts of intertextuality and paratextuality are especially helpful. Therefore, this chapter seeks to account for how these two concepts can be applied to worlds like Transformers in order to understand them textually.
In addition, concepts such as *branding*, *synergy* and *transmedial entertainment* will be used to explain the underlying logic of these worlds of entertainment.

### 3.1 What is a ‘transmedial world of entertainment’?

What is important to remember here is that entertainment is not just about storytelling anymore [...]. It is about building universes where people can express themselves (The Matrix producer, Joel Silver, quoted in Proffitt, Yune Tchoi, & McAllister, 2007, p. 246).

In the introduction above, as in the title of this chapter, I referred to *Transformers* and similar entertainment brands as *worlds* of entertainment. As the term recurs throughout the thesis, I will explain what it is taken to mean here. The term ‘world’, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Hornby, 2000) reveals, is indeed multifaceted. However, common to all meanings suggested by the dictionary is that they refer to something rather abstract and diffuse; to something vast, without clear borders (or perhaps, with no borders at all). Indeed, while brands like *Transformers* certainly depend on solid matter for their existence – they are after all built from tangible, clear-cut commodities – they are also essentially immaterial. Their stories, albeit materialized into DVDs, VCRs, computer games, comic books and novels, are potentially endless. Even if the producers stop making new texts, consumers may continue building from the components once delivered. They may make continuations or alterations of the narratives, and they may deepen or change character profiles (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; 2006b; Gray, 2010; Sandvoss, 2011).

The notion of world, then, is attractive in that it evokes images of something both encompassing and complex. At the same time, and partly because of this, the term may evoke questions. What kind of world are we talking about? One the one hand, a phrase such as ‘the world of *Transformers*’ could refer to the fictional stories – produced by industry and by fans – in which Autobots and Decepticons struggle for the command of space and mankind. The notion of world used to accentuate the semiotic aspects of these brands, could easily be replaced with terminology such as *narrative universe* (cf. Ryan, 1985; Kline, 1993, p. 323) or, alternatively, *fictional universe* (cf. Örnebring, 2007). On the other hand, the same phrase could be used to account for all the commodities comprising the *Transformers* brand. When used in this way, that is, referring to the more materialistic side of brands, the concept of *franchise* could be a good alternative (cf. Grainge, 2008; Jenkins, 2006a).

Occasionally, the term ‘world’ will be replaced by both ‘narrative/fictional universe’ and ‘franchise’ in this thesis as a way of avoiding tedious repetition.
but mainly to emphasize different aspects of these brands. Primarily, though these brands will be referred to as transmedial worlds. This concept was introduced by Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2004), and defined as follows:

Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the “worldness” (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world’s worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time. Quite often the world has a cult (fan) following across media as well (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004).

In our definition, a transmedial world is more than a specific story, although its properties are usually communicated through storytelling. For example, the transmedial world of Tolkien’s Middle Earth is more than the particular book trilogy called *The Lord of the Rings*, and it includes, films, the board games, the computer games, the fan fiction, the landscapes painted by graphic artists, etc. (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004).

As I will argue, this term is useful in many ways. To begin with, Klastrup’s and Tosca’s definition bridges the semiotic and the economic aspects of these brands. It refers to franchises with tentacles reaching wide across the consumer market and it refers to the fictional stories and characters inhabiting these worlds (the ‘worldness’). Secondly, the concept covers both the industrially produced components of these brands and the fan-produced ones. Thirdly, the adding of the prefix ‘transmedia’ serves to highlight that these brands are always built on and distributed across a range of media platforms; hence the scope of most of these brands. As the chapter proceeds, this particular aspect will be elaborated further, primarily in the context of so called ‘transmedia storytelling’ (cf. Jenkins, 2006a; Bolin, 2007; Long, 2007). Finally, Klastrup’s and Tosca’s term beneficially acknowledges both the commodification and spatialization processes that *Transformers* and similar brands are subject to, albeit implicitly. However, it would also make sense to replace ‘transmedia’ with ‘brand’ (Örnebring, 2007, p. 452), as these entertainment universes are always built on a core brand. The next section therefore seeks to increase the understanding of these worlds by describing them also as brand worlds.

### 3.1.1 Transmedial worlds as brand worlds

With the emergence of *brand culture*, as described in the previous chapter, brand experiences have grown increasingly important (cf. Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Moor, 2003; Ritzer, 2005; Arvidsson, 2006), and the ambition to build brand experiences has encouraged corporations to make use of all kinds of media as brand windows. Without the brand as a common denominator for all products
within entertainment worlds such as *Transformers*, the possibilities to create synergy would be fewer. As explained by Paul Grainge, synergy, which became a buzzword in the entertainment industry in the 1990s, has become “a basis for examining the particularities of contemporary entertainment spectacle” (2008, p. 11). These so called “particularities” refer primarily to the greatly diversified business structures that the branding ambitions have required (further discussed in Chapter 4, ‘World-building by industry’). The Walt Disney Company, undisputed master of synergy, is for example a multi-division conglomerate with interests in film, television, music, toys, theme parks, clothing, and much more.

In this thesis, synergy will especially be understood as a marketing advantage; that is, as *cross-promotion*. By all means, Grainge (2008) considers cross-promotion to the prime manifestation of synergy. As he explains, “synergy is best described as a principle of cross-promotion whereby companies seek to integrate and disseminate their products through a variety of media and consumer channels, enabling ‘brands’ to travel through an integrated corporate structure” (Grainge, 2008, p. 10). In addition to explaining how cross-promotion works as synergy, Grainge’s definition also suggests that synergy can only be understood in relation to the new status of brands in the contemporary entertainment industry. For, again, what is being cross-promoted by the different company divisions is not so much particular products as particular brands.

Especially characteristic of entertainment brands is that they are based on media content to a great extent. As recognized by, for example, Harold Vogel, content is a key resource in the industry and “where most consumer and investor attention is typically focused” (2007, p. 41). As he explains, media and entertainment companies compete and obtain brand equity through popular content in the form of, for example, books, records, films, programming or game software (Vogel, 2007, p. 41). Thus, *Transformers* and similar properties can be said to represent what Adam Arvidsson calls *content brands* (2006, p. 75). These can be understood as brands for which content functions as platform for further product development, or, as explained by Arvidsson, as brands that “travel between and provide a context for the consumption of a number of goods and media commodities” (2006, p. 75). So may film content, for instance, provide intriguing characters and enthralling stories from which to develop future extensions, such as video games, toys, or comic books.

Employing the similar notion of *narrative brands*, Carlos A. Scolari (2009) also recognizes the function of content as a platform to be exploited over and over. As he points out, “The Matrix and *Harry Potter* are not just names of movies or narrative sagas for young readers; they’re heavyweight narrative brands that ex-
press themselves in different media, languages, and business areas” (Scolari, 2009, p. 590). As Scolari also acknowledges, semioticians do in fact think of brands per se as ‘narrative worlds’ which can be analyzed in much the same ways as fictional texts. However, various sorts of branding strategies are changing the relationship between brands and fiction, and Scolari suggests that today it is not enough to think of “brands as narrative worlds”; we need also to consider that “narrative worlds are brands” (2009, p. 599). Most significantly, and as shown in the subsequent chapter, more or less sophisticated forms of “embedded marketing”, such as product or brand placements contribute to the altered relationship. Yet, in addition, new types of storytelling tend to change things even more radically (see section 3.3). As Scolari (2009) also argues, nowadays, brands not only exist inside the fiction, but rather the fiction is the brand.

3.2 Webs of promotion

Postmodernists generally claim that contemporary culture is characterized by self-reference; it is a culture full of references but without clear referents (cf. Lyotard, 1984; Baudrillard, 1994; Perry, 1998). While not all would accept such a radical statement, few would deny that the media system is becoming increasingly self-referential. A hasty look at the media content on an average day makes evident that this content, to a great extent, is based on other media texts. As Winifred Nöth explains: “Instead of representing something heard about, seen, lived, or otherwise experienced in social life, culture, and nature, journalists, commercial artists, designers, and film directors report increasingly what has been seen, heard, or reported before in the media” (2008, p. 3). Thus, the media is in a constant process of producing intertexts; texts “whose reference is not to real life but to other texts” (Nöth, 2008, p. 3). Not only do film makers, advertisers or song writers, for instance, inspire each other and make gestures to each other’s works; also, business economists encourage content to travel across platforms and to, more or less sophisticatedly, connect with other content. Commercial intertexts, as observed by several researchers, constitute the life-blood of the entire entertainment industry (cf. Meehan, 1991; Jansson, 2002; Marshall, 2002). As Andrew Wernick (1991) and others have recognized, due to ever-accelerated commodification and commercialization today’s consumer culture might well be described as a maze of advertisements and commodities which relentlessly and inevitably serve to cross-fertilize each other. In this “promotional culture”, no commodities or advertisements ever stand alone, but are always part of more or less extensive webs of intertextuality (Wernick, 1991).
3.2.1 Commercial intertextuality

Since Michail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva introduced their ideas and terminology around intertextuality, the notion that all texts are interlinked has influenced much media research. In line with Roland Barthes, who was among the first to use the term in a popular culture context, John Fiske deems intertextuality to be one of the most perceptible characteristics of today’s culture – and especially of today’s popular culture. As he argues, “all popular texts have leaky boundaries; they flow into each other, they flow into everyday life” (1994, p. 126). As a consequence of these leaky boundaries, he claims, no popular text is ever complete in itself but must always be read in relation to other popular texts. To study popular culture, then, takes what Fiske calls “intertextual competence” (1994, p. 125).

As to distinguish between types of intertextuality, Fiske (1997b) writes about horizontal and vertical relations. Horizontal relations are those that exist between one primary text (or, ‘ur-text’) and another, whereas vertical relations are those between a primary text and “other texts”. These other texts may be either secondary texts (“such as studio publicity, journalistic features, or criticism”) or tertiary texts (texts produced by the audience/readers, such as “letters to the press or, more importantly, […] gossip and conversation”, see Fiske, 1997b, p. 108). Referring to Tony Bennett’s and Janet Woollacott’s analysis of the highly “intertextual phenomenon” James Bond (1987), Fiske argues that both secondary and tertiary texts promote certain readings of the primary text. They serve as ‘intertextual activators’ in the sense that they activate particular meanings in the primary text and thus contribute to the text’s polysemy (Fiske 1997b; see also Gray, 2006).

Yet, the fruitfulness of Fiske’s division of intertextuality into vertical and horizontal relations has been critiqued. Marsha Kinder’s (1991) work on what she calls commercial supersystems of transmedia intertextuality, for instance, is an outspoken critique of Fiske’s account of intertextuality. With reference to successful franchises like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT), she explains the nature of these kinds of “supersystems”:

A supersystem is a network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture who are either fictional […] or “real” […]. In order to be a supersystem, the network must cut across several modes of image production; must appeal to diverse generations, classes, and ethnic subcultures, who in turn are targeted with diverse strategies; must foster “collectability” through a proliferation of related products; and must undergo a sudden increase in commodification, the success of which reflexively becomes a ‘media event’ that dramatically accelerates the growth curve of the system’s commercial success (Kinder, 1991, p. 122f).
As Kinder argues, today’s popular culture, marked by the mounting presence of these kinds of supersystems, do not allow researchers to make convenient distinctions neither between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ texts, nor, consequently, between vertical and horizontal kinds of intertextuality. As she notes, within franchises like TMNT, primary texts may well serve as advertising for other primary texts as well as for secondary texts. Again, as a result of synergy, a TV-show centered on a popular writer, for instance, may serve to promote a book, yet at the same time the book can be considered advertising the TV-show. If the book in turn is centered on, say, a celebrity actress, then it certainly becomes even messier to categorize these texts into the primary or secondary.

Wernick’s (1991) analysis of the intertextual intertwining of advertising and the consumer products being promoted certainly underscores Kinder’s complaints. In line with Kinder (1991), he identifies the potential for any cultural goods to function as promotion for other goods. This significant condition, in turn, contributes to a blurring of boundaries between different kinds of content. Not only does the borrowing of symbols between the advertising industry and the media and entertainment industry dissolve the boundaries between commercial messages and entertainment, but in this promotional culture basically every commodity may also function as a form of advertising.

Both Kinder’s and Wernick’s account of intertextuality in the contemporary media landscape moves us close to what Eileen Meehan (1991) has referred to as commercial intertextuality. Analyzing the “commercial intertext” known as Batman, she shows how cultural commodities tend to be developed into far-stretched product lines, which typically include several media platforms. Picking up the heritage from Meehan and refining the notion of commercial intertextuality further, David Marshall (2002) provides additional insights on the matters discussed here. What media-oriented companies of today ultimately want to create, he explains, is “the new intertextual commodity”; a commodity that is actively connected to other commodities or cultural forms. Motivated by commodification objectives and made possible by spatialization processes (most notably conglomeration), these commodities have come to saturate contemporary consumer culture in general and children’s commercial culture in particular. Through this kind of commodities the industry seeks to “capture the interactive audience” (Marshall, 2002, p. 69), and to direct consumers from one commodity or cultural form to another. The result is what Marshall calls “an elaborate intertextual matrix” (2002, p. 69) in which all components are interconnected. Notably, the new intertextual commodity also tends to attract advertisers seeking for new marketing platforms (see next chapter, ‘World-Building by industry’), and
the blockbuster film, especially, has contributed largely to the emergence of the new intertextual commodity as it commonly serves as a “promotional engine” for an array of related products. When explaining the nature of the new intertextual commodity, Marshall (2002) also acknowledges the important circumstance that these commodities, as well as their surrounding promotion, are sources of profit and pleasure, simultaneously. The promotional material that supports them is typically created to encourage play – not only amongst children but also amongst adults – and serves to deepen consumer engagement further. Also, this material potentially extends “the pleasure of anticipation” (2002, p. 80), as Marshall also recognizes. Without revealing too much of my findings at this stage, it can be noted that this function of promotions is particularly relevant in relation to my own study of the Transformers brand world (see Chapter 9, ‘Assessing the issue of power’).

Indeed, the dialectic between economic and cultural processes involved in commercial intertextuality is worth accentuating – not only since this will help us understand the nature of “paratexts” and other phenomena important to this chapter more fully, but also since such a focus times with my ambitions with this thesis at large. In line with Marshall’s arguments (2002), André Jansson finds evidence of “new forms of commodified interactivity” (2002, p. 12) through which consumers are encouraged to become active and engaged in intertextually connected commodities. Also like Marshall, Jansson views the proliferation of commercial intertextuality against the backdrop of ongoing conglomerate, which triggers product diversification as well as cross-promotional efforts. With an entertainment industry striving for “multi-product concepts” (Jansson, 2002, p. 21), it stands beyond doubt that this kind of intertextuality is industrially driven. However, Jansson stresses an equally important circumstance; namely that commercial intertextuality – however sophisticatedly planned and created by brand managers – is always subject to negotiation. It is not, Jansson explains, something that is imposed on passive consumers, but rather it gains its meaning in the moment of consumption. Consequently, Jansson concludes, we need to consider not only the economic motives behind commercial intertextuality but also the ways in which commodities are integrated into consumers’ daily lives. Such a conclusion, in turn, motivates a shift in focus here to the notion of paratextuality, which, no doubt, acknowledges the double role played by cultural commodities and related promotional material.
3.2.2 Paratextuality

A great contributor to the theory of paratextuality is Jonathan Gray, who has brought in many useful perspectives on how we might understand today’s popular culture franchises as textual worlds (cf. 2006; 2008; 2010). As he argues, paratexts play significant roles in these worlds, as they “create texts” (2010, p. 21) and thereby influence our interpretation of actual texts. In short, paratexts are textual components providing us with a framework of interpretation through which we can understand, for instance, a new film, show, comic book, or novel. Gray provides the following explanation to how paratexts may be understood in relation to other parts of the media system:

Paratexts surround texts, audiences, and industry, as organic and naturally occurring a part of our mediated environment as are movies and television themselves. If we imagine the triumvirate of Text, Audience, and Industry as the Big Three of media practice, then paratexts fill the space between them, conditioning passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three (2010, p. 23).

Tangible forms of paratexts include promotional material, such as posters, trailers, or merchandise, but also press reviews, DVD bonus material, interviews, and the similar. Importantly, Gray (2010) also recognizes the paratextual functions played by fan-made textual components, such as online fan talk. However, any textual component – including what we may normally perceive of as “main” commodities, such as a film or a book – may work paratextually. As Gray shows, promotional paratexts such as t-shirts or trailers may even “slide past” the film or television show to which they are intertextually connected, in terms of significance to the consumers. In such cases, the film or the TV-show would constitute paratexts to the t-shirt or trailer. Ultimately then, and in line with the arguments above, the theory of paratextuality further invalidates a categorization of texts into ‘primary’ or ‘secondary’ (see Gray, 2010, p. 175ff).

As Gray (2010) accurately notes, we are often warned not to judge a book by its cover. Still, this is exactly what we always tend to do: we make meaning of and attribute value to media texts by the help of their “covers”. As shown by Gray (2010), mediated adventures begin and continue with paratexts containing bits of information about the text to which they belong. A trailer, for example, might influence our interpretation of a film long before we attend the cinema, by revealing the film’s genre, themes, stars, author, and so on. As Gray points out, most of us have probably seen more trailers than actual films. However, even if we decide not to see the film, we still – thanks to the surrounding paratexts – have created a meaning about it. Paratexts, ultimately, can add and restore value to a text, but also deprive it of value (Gray, 2010, p. 113).
In Gray’s view, textual components commonly referred to as “promotion”, “hype”, “synergy” or, “peripherals” are usually dismissed (by academics or other commentators) as merely commercialism, and regarded as less important than the media products to which they are attached. They are usually taken to exist at what we normally conceive of as the margins of transmedial worlds of entertainment (Gray, 2010). Indeed, the traditional focus of media studies has been on “artworks” such as films or novels rather than on the “stuff” trying to sell these. And when academic attention has been directed towards promotional paratexts, such as trailers, posters or advertising campaigns, these have been of interests primarily as marketing vehicles and only rarely as textual elements which carry meaning and value beyond their promotional status.

However, as Gray argues, in a media culture in which paratexts tend to become increasingly important, “it is time to examine the paratexts” (2010, p. 8). While not all texts are accompanied with the same amounts of paratexts (“high-art” films usually come with less promotion than the typical Hollywood blockbuster, for example), all texts have paratexts (Gray, 2010). And certainly, when considering the money involved in the creation of paratexts, the need to conduct “off-screen studies” becomes even more apparent (Gray, 2010). Describing what he considers to be “an odd paradox” of media and cultural studies, Gray explains: “[…] while the industry pumps millions of dollars and labor hours into carefully crafting its paratexts and then saturates our lived environments with them, media and cultural studies often deal with them only in passing” (2010, p. 7). While the subsequent chapter will deal with this economic side of paratexts more carefully, I want to continue here by focusing on their textual characteristics and potentials to generate meaning and value with the audiences.

While Gray (2008; 2010) has done a valuable effort to develop and expand our understanding of paratextuality, the theory departs from Gerard Genette (1997), who uses the term ‘paratext’ to refer to productions which make a text what it is. As Genette explains, texts rarely function in isolation; they need to be strengthened and presented with the help of other texts. In much the same way that paralanguage – as for example voice quality, gestures, facial expression and touch (Cook, 2001) – impacts on how we interpret talk, paratexts affect how we “read” texts. Genette elucidates the relationship between ‘text’ and ‘paratext’ in the following manner:

although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world (1997, p. 1).
Importantly, this quotation manages to pinpoint the potential *double* function of paratexts – as both promotion and as a vehicle for meaning creation. While Genette (1997) almost exclusively focused on the paratexts of textual narratives, Gray’s (2010) analyzes of film and television shows that it works with different kinds of media. For, what is the function of, for example, a film trailer, poster, or ad, if not to simultaneously “present” and “make present” the film itself? These paratexts all serve as interpretative frameworks to the movie but also as a means by which to make people aware of the movie’s upcoming release. As Genette continues to explain, “[m]ore than a boundary or sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or […] a ‘vestibule’ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside” (1997, p. 2). As he adds, “Most often […] the paratext is itself a text: if it is not *the* text, it is already *some* text” (1997, p. 7).

Both Gray (2010) and Genette (1997) suggest categories by which we can distinguish between different *types* of paratexts. Most importantly, with respect to my own analyses, Genette separates between *official* and *unofficial* paratexts. The latter are those messages that are “openly accepted by the author or publisher or both – a message for which the author cannot evade responsibility” (1997, p. 10). These would, I assume, include all paratexts produced by (or in collaboration with) marketing personnel, such as PR interviews, advertisements, press releases, commercial-spots, logotypes, etc. The former category, then, contains the opposite: messages for which neither the author nor the publisher has responsibility and which therefore can be disclaimed or denied. Drawing on Genette’s descriptions, this category would include productions like fan fiction, reviews, websites, art, forum conversations, etc.; phenomena which Gray (2010) refers to as “audience-created paratexts” and which will be further contextualized in Chapter 5, ‘World-building by fans’.

Arguably, Genette’s separation between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ paratexts is to some extent comparable to what Gray (2006) calls *supportive* and *critical* intertextuality. The first type occurs through attempts to control intertextuality by means of, for example, advertisements, promotions, or managed interviews. Ultimately, these paratexts are intended to direct readers to certain readings. The second type, on the contrary, occurs through paratexts which are used to “attack a text, to subvert its preferred meanings and to propose unofficial and unsanctioned readings” (2006, p. 37). As Gray points out, using *The Simpsons* texts as an example, parody represents an especially efficient form of critical intertextuality.
Yet, despite the fairly high level of coherence between Genette’s (1997) and Gray’s (2006) categorizations, they are not entirely overlapping. For, while it can be assumed that a good amount of Genette’s ‘unofficial’ paratexts are ‘critical’, in the sense that Gray suggests, it must still be acknowledged that ‘unofficial’ paratexts can also be ‘supportive’. These ‘supportive unofficial’ paratexts would, for example, be manifested as celebratory talk, writing or imaging made by fans and other embracive consumers. As argued by Gray (2008), whilst industry-made and fan-made paratexts may be at odds with one another from time to time, both will influence the consumer’s interpretation of the main text. Equally true, and as subsequent theory chapters will argue in greater detail, both types contribute to the incessant growth and visibility of the overall transmedial world of which they are part.

### 3.3 Expanding the web

Hence, due to the constant adding of new paratexts – which in turn needs to be understood in relation to processes of commodification and spatialization in the entertainment industry – the webs of promotion making up brands such as *Transformers* are in a constant growth. And, as a result of intensified product differentiation, the question of what *Transformers* – or *Batman, Shrek, Bratz, Star Wars, Star Trek, My Little Pony, Winx Club*, or any other transmedial world of entertainment – actually *is*, is becoming increasingly difficult to answer. In an attempt to describe the *Pokémon*-phenomenon that hit the children’s market in the mid-1990s, David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green suggest the following:

> It is clearly not just a ‘text’, or even a collection of texts – a TV serial, a card game, toys, magazines or a computer game. It is not merely a set of objects that can be isolated for critical analysis, in the characteristic mode of academic Media Studies. It might more appropriately be described, in anthropological terms, as a ‘cultural practice’. *Pokémon* is something you *do*, not just something you read or watch or ‘consume’ (2003, p. 379).

To Tim Jordan, *Pokémon* is a prime example of “branded hyperdifferentiating capitalism” (2004, p. 461). Under such capitalism, product and consumption cycles spin faster: more products are being brought to the market and these products are more often replaced and differentiated. While “multiplatforming”, as Göran Bolin (2010b) points out, is not an entirely new phenomenon, digitization – along with new branding practices – has taken it to new levels of sophistication. In many respects, these new levels of complexity have to do with the raising degrees of intertextuality between commodities previously accounted for (Jansson, 2002; Kinder, 1991; Marshall, 2002; Wernick, 1991).
In the literature on this subject, distinctions are habitually made between ‘adaptations’, ‘re-mediations’ and ‘transmedia storytelling’. While these concepts are closely related, they ultimately cannot be exchanged without a change of meaning (Littau, 2011). Out of these concepts, however, adaptation and remediation stand out as most equivalent. These labels are commonly used to describe the process by which new media commodities are created from other media commodities (Bolin, 2007). This is what happens when, for example, a comic book narrative become adapted or remediated into a film or a video game, or vice versa. Following Gray (2010), each such new adaptation or remediation is to be thought of as a new paratext.

While, as Bolin declares, adaptations or re-mediations inevitably do add something to the original narrative, this happens more out of “necessity” than by careful planning. With transmedia storytelling, however, things are different. As suggested by Karin Littau, transmedia, or as she prefers, ‘cross-media’ storytelling can be considered an ‘extension’ of adaptation:

Cross-media storytelling is not the same thing as adaptation, but it involves adaptation at each juncture ‘as’ or ‘where’ a serial fragment is tied to the ‘whole’. In crucial respects, cross-media practices are extensions of the principles of adaptations: a given story, character, or motif must be fitted into a new environment in a meaningful way (2011, p. 32).

The concept of transmedia storytelling was introduced by Henry Jenkins (2003; 2006a; 2007, March 22) and has gained enormous popularity over the last years. As Littau’s writings reveal, the term is sometimes used in connection to similar albeit not necessarily synonymous concepts, such as ‘cross media’ (Bechmann Petersen, 2006), ‘cross-media storytelling’ (Dena, 2004; Littau, 2011), ‘multiple platform’ (Jeffrey-Poulter, 2003), and ‘multimodality’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). What transmedia storytelling ultimately refers to are stories that are not just “copied and pasted” from one medium to another (as, in a constricted sense, would be the case with adaptations or re-mediations). Rather, a transmedial story is a story in which every unit, every new text, makes a “distinctive and valuable contribution” to the narrative as a whole (Jenkins, 2006a). Hence, while an adapted or remediated story, in its very basic elements at least, remain the same regardless of the medium through which it is told, in transmedia storytelling the narrative is always significantly enriched with every new text. In other words: whereas the main consequence of adaptations/re-mediations is repetition, transmedia storytelling leads primarily to expansion (Long, 2007). Low-budget film The Blair Witch Project has been claimed to represent a prime example of good working transmedia storytelling (along with, for instance, the The Matrix films and television series 24). Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings film trilogy, on
the other hand, has been used to exemplify adaptations/re-mediations, since these films (notwithstanding their aesthetic and dramaturgical qualities) are but film versions of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novels (Long, 2007).

Putting a semiotic focus on transmedia storytelling, Scolari (2009) points out that the transmedial narrative expands both through the use of different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.). Like Jenkins (2006a), he also commends transmedia storytelling for being “one of the most important sources of complexity in contemporary popular culture” (Scolari, 2009, p. 587). However, despite the concept’s wide acceptance, impact and use among business people and researchers, there is still, to date, some confusion as to what is actually meant by transmedia storytelling. Roughly speaking, it is possible to separate what could be called inclusive definitions of transmedia storytelling from more exclusive ones. The first category, represented by for example Jenkins, allows a broader array of narrative worlds to be counted as transmedia storytelling. Following this set of definitions, a story can be called transmedial even if each of its textual components could be understood or enjoyed in isolation. With the more exclusive and rigid definitions, only stories whose textual units cannot be understood or enjoyed in isolation typically count as true transmedia storytelling. This second group of definitions is close to what Christy Dena (2006, January 6) calls transfiction. She explains the difference between this concept and Jenkins’ in the following manner:

By transfiction I refer to stories that are distributed over more than one text, one medium. Each text, each story on each device or each website is not autonomous, unlike Henry Jenkins’ transmedia storytelling. In transfiction (a term to counter Jenkins’, though they should be the other way around!), the story is dependent on all the pieces on each medium, device or site to be read/experienced for it to be understood. Basically, no single segment will be sufficient (Dena, 2006, January 6).

As recognized by Geoffrey Long (2007), Dena’s notion of transfiction can be regarded as a subset to Jenkins’s notion of transmedia storytelling. What I would argue is that a single narrative world – unified by a set of indispensable characters and symbols – may contain both categories of storytelling. Indeed, as will be shown, in the case of Transformers that some textual units within this world make better sense when read together with others, whereas the majority of texts work perfectly well as solitaires. Although both Jenkins’s use of the concept of transmedia storytelling and Dena’s transfiction are useful as analytical tools, I will mainly employ the umbrella term of transmedial entertainment to include both of these kinds of storytelling, along with adaptations/re-
mediations. In my experience, the replacement of ‘storytelling’ by ‘entertainment’ at times serves a purpose, especially when the aim is to give an account not only of the “core” textual components of these universes but also of all the “stuff” that accompanies these texts, such as toys and merchandise. To repeat an earlier argument, the contributions of these paratextual items to the narratives of these worlds are often ignored, despite the fact that fans may regard them as absolutely essential to the overall saga (cf. Gray, 2010). Not only does “the stuff” generate large amounts of extra revenue, but it also represents important entryways into these worlds of entertainment. For some consumers it might just be the little plastic figure in the ‘Happy Meal’-box that triggers a durable relationship with the franchise.

For the sake of contextualization, the above account of inclusive and exclusive kinds of transmedia storytelling should also be put in relation to what Gray calls textually incorporated and textually unincorporated paratexts (2010, p. 207ff). As Gray (2010) points out, a great challenge of today’s entertainment companies is to create a “flow” between commodities and paratexts, and between one paratext and another. A problem, from the industry’s point of view, is that different personnel work with the texts and the paratexts. While films and shows, for instance, are generally created by “artists”, many paratexts originate in marketing departments, and this situation, Gray argues, results in poor textual cohesion. Some paratexts, however, are more coherent with their texts than others, and do add new dimensions to a text. These paratexts, then, are what Gray calls incorporated paratexts. The opposite is unincorporated paratexts, which do not add anything of relevance to the text, or which may even harm the text. As Gray puts it:

In cases when the paratext adds nothing or harms the narrative or storyworld, we can more easily criticize the paratext for being merely a marketing tool; in cases when the paratext adds to the narrative or storyworld and develops them, we have a more complex entity (2010, p. 209).

While, in practice, it would be somewhat troublesome to try to determine the paratextual elements that “add” something to the overarching text and those that do not, Gray’s categorization into textually incorporated and unincorporated paratexts certainly invite an analysis of the intrinsic webs of texts and promotion that transmedial entertainment comprise. As I later will give an account of, one particular marketing effort in relation to the Transformers 2007 film, the notion of textually incorporated paratexts becomes particularly attractive as a conceptual term (see section 7.6 in Chapter 7, ‘Building and promoting an ‘immersive brand experience’).
3.3.1 Creating loyal transmedia consumers

The economic logic of horizontally integrated entertainment industry – that is, one where a single company may have roots across all of the different media sectors – dictates the flow of content across media (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 98).

As recognized by Jenkins, economic factors are important to consider when explaining the increased “flow of content across media”. And, as indicated above, business logic encourages worlds of cross-media entertainment that are “inclusive” rather than “exclusive”. While more exclusive franchises attract and are consumed by dedicated people, many people would probably be reluctant to enter the fictional universe if they knew they had to “do homework” on the franchise before doing so. Therefore, as Jenkins suggests, “Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so that you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole” (2006a, p. 98).

Hence, by offering multiple “points of entry” to these kinds of entertainment worlds – in the shape of paratexts – companies increase the opportunities for mass consumption. Not only do different media tend to attract different categories of consumers (computer games, for example, are generally consumed by younger people whereas movies often magnetize more diverse audiences), but single text worlds can also be enjoyed by broad groups of consumers (Jenkins, 2006a; Scolari, 2009). However, by definition, even more inclusive transmedial franchises are designed to lure the consumers not to be satisfied with only one media or text experience. Preferably, they are to become brand loyalists and move between different units within the franchise rather than to competing worlds of entertainment. By “reading across media”, Jenkins suggests, the consumer “sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption” (2006a:98, my emphasis). Hence, the transmedia consumer⁴ – that is, the consumer who is ready to read across media and languages (Scolari, 2009) – is by definition a faithful consumer.

In this context, it is worth noting that transmedial entertainment texts are commonly marketed as if they constituted “narratively necessary purchases” (Proffitt, et al., 2007, p. 243). Applying Raymond William’s (1974) “flow”-

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⁴ Scolari (2009), in his analysis of the highly transmedial television series 24, divides the consumers into three categories, depending on their involvement with the story. Whereas single text consumers and single media consumers tend to consume single units of a transmedial franchise in more or less isolation, transmedia consumers are more interested in the narrative universe as a whole and consume it through different media and languages.
metaphor on blockbuster phenomenon *The Matrix*, Jennifer M. Proffitt et al. show how “linked commodity narratives” (2007, p. 239) constitute a new business model for Hollywood through which revenue streams become multiplied, and in which consumers, and fans especially, are encouraged to move between content platforms in search of full entertainment experiences. Background stories and “must-have” commodities may, as the authors point out, lure serious fans to buy across a branded assortment of goods or media content. Like, for example, Marshall (2002) and Jansson (2002), the authors accentuate the spatialization of corporate interests as fundamental to the emergence of the intertextual commodity. Within the conglomerate structure created, they argue, we witness not only a repetition of brand appearances (as observed by Meehan, 1991) but also extensions of brand narratives. Helpfully leading us into the second theory chapter on the business of transmedial entertainment, and pointing towards what will be further elaborated in the third theory chapter on fandom, they write:

*The Matrix* trilogy demonstrates […] that showing off one’s fandom via hats or t-shirts is not enough. A new goal for transnational, transindustrial conglomerates is to ensure the flow of audiences from one medium to multiple platforms with storytelling characteristics. True *Matrix* fans are therefore constituted by their participation in the flow of fan activity that the companies involved create; the marketing strategy supports the notion that a ‘genuine’ fan will purchase additional merchandise to deepen his or her understanding of the trilogy (Proffitt, et al., 2007, p. 251).

### 3.4 Summary and concluding remarks

If properties like *Transformers* were not created with respect to synergy and branding opportunities, they would indeed be as confusing and in-coherent as they might appear at first glance. They would be nothing more than the sum of its parts. Instead, they are now complex worlds of transmedial entertainment, inhabited by intertextually and paratextually linked components, including narratives, themes, characters, imagery, iconography, etc. They are sensational brand ‘experiences’ to be enjoyed by loyal consumers over a long period of time. As such, they cannot be reduced merely to the load of “stuff” which we meet in the shopping center. Rather, these items are but nodes in an overall web of commercial intertextuality, glued together by the help of different media. Films, television-series, comic books, websites, novels, games and advertising provide these worlds with magic and fantasy.

Through various kinds of transmedial expansions, these worlds keep growing. Their content is stretched across media and product categories and become increasingly materialized with every new intertext. As a result, multiple points of
entry are created through which every consumer may find his or hers distinctive ways into this universe. While certain components of these worlds, such as key rings, stickers or ring tones, might be considered redundant, each and every one is involved in the same web of promotion and all play a double function. They are consumer goods in their own right, to be bought and enjoyed as separate units, and they are advertisements for every other product within the web. Consequently, any attempt to categorize the components of these worlds as either “advertising” or “non-advertising” is doomed to fail. In reality, all ingredients are promotional. Through their inherited features, these branded worlds can be considered both symptoms and drivers of contemporary consumer and brand culture. They are manifestations of a broad range of developments which characterize this culture, including key processes identified in the previous, contextualizing chapter: media convergence, commodification and spatialization.

In a similar vein, they are symptoms of the current state of the *entertainment industry* – as the next chapter will show. Before moving there, however, some clues will be offered in regards to how the contents of this current chapter have informed my actual analyses. Admittedly, while the chapter has introduced a number of concepts which have been deemed necessary for understanding the inner logics of transmedial worlds of entertainment, their respective relevance to my analyses differ. As my presentation of findings from the *Transformers* case will make evident, however, the notions of *intertextuality* and *paratextually* have been of special value to my analytical endeavor to make sense of this particular world of commodities and paratexts. In regard to sub-concepts related to these broader labels, the conceptual pairs of *supportive* and *critical* intertextuality, *official* and *unofficial* paratexts, and *textually incorporated* and *textually unincorporated* paratexts have influenced my analyses of professional and amateur contributions to the 2007 *Transformers* franchise.
4 World-building by industry

The blurring of boundaries between different forms of entertainment, the transformation of film into consumer products, the merging of make-believe and real life – these are no longer accidental and playful fragments of postmodern media culture but the economic preconditions of the continued existence of the global entertainment sector (Hozic, 2001, p. 217).

While the previous chapter has already indicated that entertainment companies have much to gain from building ‘intertextual’ and ‘paratextual’ worlds of entertainment, there is more to add about how these worlds are actually created to generate profits. It has been argued that the ‘webs of promotion’ that constitute these worlds create fruitful synergies for the companies involved, as they ensure a constant and unavoidable stage of cross-referencing. It is also suggested that the boundaries between advertising and non-advertising are being blurred as a result of all this cross-referencing. From a marketing perspective, this would be a welcome development, as it means that all commodities may take on the role of advertising, while at the same time serving as additional revenue sources.

With this general understanding as a basis for how transmedial entertainment pays off, it is the purpose of this chapter to provide a deeper knowledge on the economic rationale behind this form of entertainment. As such, this chapter should be regarded as a continuation of the previous one but with a sharpened focus on commercial cultural production within today’s converging entertainment industry. More specifically, this chapter will map out some of the most significant motives behind these worlds of entertainment, including objectives connected to commodification and spatialization (such as ‘marketability’ and ‘streamability’). As stressed by Jennifer M Proffitt et al: “it is necessary to understand the new economic structures that produce intertexts, including the practices and strategies used by media conglomerates to exploit successful cultural products across outlets” (Proffitt, et al., 2007, p. 241).

As this chapter will argue, although there might be many reasons for companies to invest in transmedial entertainment – beyond simply making money – it is possible to get closer to some of the most significant clues by taking the concept of risk as a starting point. Indeed, in various descriptions of the contemporary entertainment industry, the risk factor is particularly prominent (cf. Ryan, 1992; Wyatt, 1994/2006; Wolf, 1999; Hartley, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Vogel, 2007). David Hesmondhalgh even mentions risk as the foremost feature of this industry. As he explains, “All business is risky, but the cultural industries constitute a particularly risky business […]” (2007, p. 18). The existence of risk
is claimed to have a severe impact on the way entertainment companies operate and the decisions made. It is said to affect the choice of commodities produced, how these are produced, and ultimately how they are distributed and marketed (Ryan, 1992; Wasko, 1994; Wyatt, 1994/2006; Murray, 2003).

As this chapter will also show, the risk factor is particularly relevant in any explanation to why transmedial worlds of entertainment have become so central to the whole industry. Reducing risk means increasing control – over audience behavior, over copyrighted properties and ultimately over the brand world itself – and therefore the strategies to achieve this (sense of) control become important, not only to the actors within the entertainment industry, but also to the subsequent analyses of this thesis. But before elaborating upon these risk-reducing or, alternatively, control-increasing strategies further, I will address what kinds of risk are at stake here, and how they occur.

4.1 The risk factor

The business of entertainment is marked by high levels of unpredictability and uncertainty for consumers as well as for producers (Ryan, 1992; Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). From a business perspective, which is what is most relevant here, the perceived high level of risk has been explained with reference to the difficulties of controlling the outcomes of cultural production and to the fact that different sections of the industry rely upon each other for making audiences aware of new products (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Significantly, the perceived level of risk must also be placed in relation to the relatively high production costs characterizing the entire industry (Murray, 2003; 2005; Vogel, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2007).

The film commodity is the epitome of this reality. Between 1980 and 2005, the cost of the average picture made by one of the major studios climbed from less than $10 million to $60 million. Advertising costs, which make up an increasingly huge part of the film budget, in the same time period rose from $4,3 million to $36,5 million (Vogel, 2007, p. 90). Hence, in 2005 the average major produced film had a total budget of nearly $100 million. Harold L. Vogel explains this trend of rising costs with reference to the “uniqueness” of every film project: “Costs in this industry always tend to rise faster than in many other sectors of the economy because moviemaking procedures, although largely standardized, must be uniquely applied to each project and because efficiencies of scale are not easily attained” (2007, p. 114).

Needless to say, these high production costs would not be considered a problem if they were matched with even higher incomes. However, in the film
industry, returns of revenues (operating margins) have shrunk by at least one-third between the years 1980 to 2005, and they have remained well below the peaks of the late 1970s (Vogel, 2007, p. 90). The precarious predicament of the entire entertainment industry is that it operates under a 20-80 percent-rule: 20 percent of the items produced generally produce 80 percent of the revenues for profit (Vogel, 2007, p. 137). As explained by Hesmondhalgh, “the hits and misses are part of the same system. The rampant success of the minority depends upon the endemic failure of the majority […]” (2007, p. 186). Thus, the major part of entertainment commodities is rejected by the large audience and thereby fails to become financially successful.

The sense of risk within the industry, then, can be regarded as a result of a combination of high production costs and unpredictable consumer preferences (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Vogel, 2007). This is partly what Hesmondhalgh (2007) refers to when he claims that the high level of risk within the entertainment business can be explained by factors related to both consumption and production. Drawing on Nicholas Garnham (1990), he recognizes that part of the risk originates in consumer behavior: “this risk derives from the fact that audiences use cultural commodities in highly volatile and unpredictable ways, often in order to express that they are different from other people” (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 19). It could be argued, however, that even the “consumer-related” problems within the industry are partly due to the efforts made by companies to constantly offer new products on the market; to continually create new “fads” and fashions (Ryan, 1992; Ewen, 1976/2001). The crude reality of most entertainment companies, then, is aptly summarized by Vogel:

[N]o matter what the entertainment industry segment, when it comes to new product introductions, we are always positioned somewhere between risk, where the odds are known, and uncertainty, where the mean-wandering, infinite variance of a returns distribution process implies anything from a huge hit to a total flop might occur. In statistical terms, there is thus great behavioral similarity in movies, television series, books, music recordings, stage plays, video games, and toys. Fads come and go (2007, p. 137).

The fact that the entertainment industries are marked by risk, uncertainty and unpredictability, however, does not mean that they should necessarily be pitied. As noted by for example Janet Wasko (1994) and Philip Drake (2008), Hollywood and other entertainment businesses have an interest in being perceived as a risky enterprise. It is part of the industry rhetoric to emphasize the hard conditions of the business, as a way to legitimate for example economic dominance or conglomerate market structures and to avoid governmental regulations. Yet, over the years, companies in the business of making and selling entertainment
have developed a range of fruitful strategies in order to reduce the perceived level of jeopardy (Wasko, 1994; see also e.g. Miller, Govil, McMurria, & Maxwell, 2001; Hozic, 2001; Murray, 2003; Vogel, 2007). As we shall see, many of these strategies point directly towards the building of transmedial worlds of entertainment. On a macro-level, conglomeration and alliances between companies outside and inside of the entertainment industry have given rise to a global network in which entertainment commodities may be circulated and repackaged with increased speed and with growing intertextual sophistication (Compaine & Gomery, 2000; Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Chan-Olmsted, 2006; McChesney, 2008). Copyright considerations and efforts to create “liquid” content to flow across multiple media platforms and product categories encourage a maximum usage of this infrastructure. On a micro-level, concerns about risk have triggered increasingly sophisticated marketing strategies, such as various kinds of cross-promotions and embedded marketing (cf. Balasubramian, 1994; Gupta & Lord, 1997; Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2006; Hudson & Hudson, 2006). Ultimately, the ambition of the entertainment companies is to minimize risk and maximize profits, by producing what would be considered safe entertainment. As this chapter will show, big business entertainment is, to a great extent but not exclusively, reproduced entertainment.

4.2 Culture and economy: The complexity of cultural production

The entertainment industry has always been situated in-between culture and capital, between art and commerce, and must therefore be understood as a complex and ambiguous field of production (Ryan, 1992; Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). As Hesmondhalgh points out, “it is impossible to understand the distinctive nature of cultural production without an understanding of the commercial/creativity dialectic” (2007, p. 20f). With a particular focus on the media industries, Mark Deuze captures the core of this dialectic in the following statement:

Media work tends to be caught between two oppositional structural factors in producing culture within media organizations: on the one hand, practitioners are expected to produce, edit, and publish content that has proven its value on a mass market – which pressure encourages standardized and predictable formats using accepted genre conventions, formulas, and routines – while creative workers on the other hand can be expected (and tend to personally favor) to come up with innovative, novel, and surprising products (2007, p. 98).

Thus, companies involved in cultural production, such as those in the business of entertainment, find themselves in a troublesome position. The risk factor tends to incite the mass production of already proven ideas, formulas and con-
cepts. It encourages entertainment franchises in which popular stories or characters are reused over and over, for instance, in sequels, adaptations or series. At the same time, industry talents are expected to be highly imaginative and to bring forward unprecedented film scripts, records, games, toy lines, etc. (Ryan, 1992). Drawing on Richard Peterson’s “production of culture perspective” (Peterson & Anand, 2004; see also Peterson, 1976), Deuze explains how this ambiguity within the industries renders two different logics which impact on decision-making processes. The editorial logic encourages cultural productions which, to a greater or lesser extent, overlook the demands to attract mass audiences and make big profits. Instead, media professionals working under this logic tend to produce content that is endorsed by critics and wins trade awards. The market logic, conversely, tends to deliver strictly commercial content that attracts the mainstream audience. With reference to Richard Caves (2000), Deuze (2007) notes that the market logic is more typical of the few transnational conglomerates within the industry and tends to generate the most lucrative content, whereas the editorial logic, mostly found within smaller firms, tend to render the most innovative content.

These two kinds of logics, promoting either creativity or economy, have commonly been understood as incompatible or even clashing (cf. Wasko 1994). Such understandings of cultural production tend to be based on, or render, a polemic in which the creative talents are considered the good guys (the “heroes”) whereas the companies and corporations come to represent evil (the “villains”) (Wikström, 2006, p. 42). Similarly, such discourses tend to include assumptions about art being “tainted” by commercial concerns to the extent that it becomes inauthentic. Arguments like these were raised decades ago by classic critical theorists; most notably by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin, who were concerned with mass production’s effect on art and culture. Such assumptions, in turn, have been met with criticism. Constance Balides, for instance, has offered the following arguments:

[...

In fact, Deuze (2007, p. 99) mentions a third possible logic, related to the increasing sole of the media as co-creator of media content: a convergence culture logic. According to Deuze, this logic emerges in a “symbiotic relationship” with the editorial and market logic. This issue – yet in terms of fan labor – will be elaborated more on in the following chapter on mass fandom.  

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Thus, it could be argued that in today's hyper-commercial culture we must get used to the fact that art and capitalism are intertwined, despite the 'contradictions' contained within this relation (Garnham, 1979; Ryan, 1992). Applying a political-economic perspective on the cultural commodity, Bill Ryan (1992), drawing on Marx and Garnham (1979), elucidates 'the contradictions of the art-capital relation'. As he explains, since art “can only spring from a social context wherein artists are accorded freedom from discipline and expectation, especially relief of commercial pressures” (Ryan, 1992, p. 46), the artist as a form of labor is “structurally incompatible with yet fundamental to the process which creates cultural commodities” (p. 48). No doubt, culture production taking place within the walls of the global entertainment industry stems from economic considerations as well as from creative individuals working inside (and outside) of the industry. Yet, while dedicated culture workers no doubt bring in a lot of artistic originality and inventiveness into the entertainment industry, there are strong indications that the market logic is the dominant one these days. If in no other way, this becomes evident when considering the types of products being produced within the walls of the industry and how these are designed.

4.2.1 Economy as gatekeeper

The term high concept serves as a good demonstration of the ways in which economic considerations affect the aesthetics of the film commodity. Originating in the television and film industries, the concept has been attributed to films with a built-in potential to become box-office successes. As properly noted by Justin Wyatt (1994/2006), though, the term has come to mean different things to different people. Media critics, in particular, have come to associate high concept with “creativity bankruptcy” in the film industry, while for filmmakers the same terminology connotes originality and uniqueness (Wyatt, 1994/2006). For Wyatt, the love of high concept films in Hollywood is evidence that filmmaking is becoming increasingly market oriented. As he puts it: 

At the most basic level, high concept can be considered as one result of the tension between the economics and aesthetics on which commercial studio filmmaking is based. All mainstream Hollywood film making is economically oriented, through the minimization of production cost and maximization of potential box office revenue. However, the connection between economics and high concept is particularly strong, since high concept appears to be the most market-driven type of film being produced (Wyatt, 1994/2006, p. 15).

The high concept film, then, is formed by economic thinking and this is manifested in two fundamental ways: in the film’s ‘style’ (its “looks and sound”) and in its “integration with marketing and merchandising” (Wyatt, 1994/2006, p. 7).
There is a strong connection between high concept and the notion of marketability: a high concept film is easy to market (to “pitch”) both as a project to decision-makers in the industry and to the audiences (Wyatt, 1994/2006). Thus, the chances for a film to get the green light and become produced increase if it is rich in “marketing hooks”, such as if it involves stars or pre-sold material. As claimed by Toby Miller et al (2001), marketability functions as a “textual gatekeeper”, along with others (most notable the notions of ‘playability’ and ‘positioning’). To Wyatt, the high concept logic is closely connected to the conglomerate increase in the overall entertainment industry, and, especially, to the felt need to reduce risk. As he estimates: “A film with marketing assets sewn into its aesthetic construction lowers the inherent financial risk of commercial filmmaking” (1994/2006, p. 60).

While the high concept logic has been mostly used in the context of television and film industries, the pursuit of high concept entertainment can be said to characterize the contemporary entertainment industry in general. This is particularly apparent in entertainment companies’ efforts to create “safe” entertainment by delivering recognizable (pre-sold) content across several platforms. As Simone Murray explains, today’s entertainment commodities are designed not only to have marketability, positioning-potential and playability. They should also have streamability:

Because power and profit in the globalised media economy hinge upon owning instantly recognisable and multi-platformable media brands, multinationals increasingly frame their acquisitions policies so as to own a stake in all media formats through which a premium content brand may be exploited. Conversely, packages of branded content are now designed from inception with content ‘streamability’ across an array of media platforms uppermost in mind (Murray, 2003, p. 9).

Yet, as Murray notes, “Streamability is […] not a product asset so much as the product’s very raison d’être” (2005, p. 432, see footnote no. 2). As with high concept, the ambition to create streamable content has important effects upon decision-making processes in the industry, in terms of what kinds of entertainment are being encouraged. In regards to this, Murray concludes that “The potential for a media product to stream outwards from its initial formulation increasingly serves as rationale for the product itself” (2005, p. 425). Thus, content that carries the prospective of developing into a multi-media franchise is more likely to attract financing than content than does not.

Children’s entertainment, in particular, tends to be created with consideration of streamability, and children’s films should preferably have ‘toyetic’ potential (Murray, 2005, p. 430). Taking a critical approach to the commercialization of
children’s television culture, Steven Kline (1993) similarly notes how economic considerations tend to affect the content itself. In connection with an analysis of the aesthetics of TV-shows for children, he notes that “the price of hyper-economy in animation quality becomes clear” (Kline, 1993, p. 823). Additionally, and in agreement with Murray (2003; 2005), Kline observes how movable characters and stories have become overriding criteria for capital investments in children’s entertainment. Again, the main ambition is to produce content that can easily flood into other product categories or media (Kline, 1993).

Using Raymond William’s (1974) flow-metaphor then, Matthew P. McAllister and J. Matt Giglio (2009) show how new forms of cross-promotion, branding, and licensing create “commodity flows” – and hence the flows of audiences – within and beyond children’s television. Such commodity flows, they explain, ultimately yield programs that look like commercials, and commercials that look like programs. These flows, the authors explain, are created through “shared textual elements” (2009, p. 116), that is, the use of the same visual styles and sounds, or through the use of the same licensed characters and programming icons, in both programs and advertising. Furthermore, conglomerate business structures and aspirations for cross-promotions yield “synergistic commodity flows” (2009, p. 121) through which additional layers of promotion are added to entertainment goods.

4.3 The liquidization of content

Accordingly, economic considerations within the business of entertainment have given rise to a situation in which content produced within one division of the industry tends to “overflow” into other areas of production (Brooker, 2001). Product diversification, then, has come to represent one of the most obvious strategies that companies rely on to reduce the perceivably high level of risk involved in the production of entertainment (Wasko, 1994; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; McDonald & Wasko, 2008). By creating “diversified revenues” (Wasko, 1994, p. 242) or “multiple revenue streams” (McDonald & Wasko, 2008, p. 5), entertainment companies may generate money enough to pay for the relatively expensive productions that are carried out. At the same time, the risk connected to unpredictable consumer behavior is spread over an entire product line rather than being carried by a single, potentially commercially unsuccessful, product. Thus, the typical Hollywood film, for example, today travels far “beyond the silver screen” (Wasko, 1994, p. 4) and usually transforms into a range of various commodities, be it TV-shows, games, records, toy lines, theme park rides, coloring books, magazines or similar (cf. Kinder, 1991; 1999; Seiter, 1992; 1993; Kinder, 1991; 1999; Seiter, 1992; 1993;
Kline, 1993; Wasko, 1994; Pecora, 1998; Hozic, 2001; Murray, 2003; 2011; Jenkins, 2006a; Vogel, 2007; Grainge, 2008). In the name of commodification, thus, content is becoming increasingly “liquid” (Deuze, 2007; Grainge, 2008, p. 175) or “fluid” (Caldwell, 2006), enabling an intertextual “flow” of content not only within media (McAllister & Giglio, 2009) but also between media (Brooker, 2001; Jenkins, 2006; Proffitt, et. al., 2007). This “flow logic” (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 244) has compelled researchers to conclude that we now live in “the age of repurposed content”, or, similarly, in “the age of multi-platformed media content” (Caldwell, 2006, p. 103).

With media convergence and digitization, reproduction of entertainment has become considerably facilitated and cheap (Murray, 2003; 2005; Jenkins, 2006a; Murray & Weedon, 2011). This, in turn, has spurred an even greater interest within the industry to reproduce what has already once been produced (Murray, 2005). As pointed out in the previous chapter and more so above, branded, copyrighted content can be regarded as the key resource for contemporary entertainment companies. Content has, in the words of Murray, transformed into “an industrial organising principle” (2003, p. 9). Entertainment companies, then, are involved in the transferral of content across platforms and product categories – processes which Murray refers to as content streaming (2003; 2005). She defines this phenomenon as “the migration of content from one platform to another” (2003, p. 9), yet she is careful to note that her use of the concept has a wider meaning than when used to talk about the delivery of audiovisual content via the internet. To Murray (2003; 2005), content streaming constitutes the central business strategy for today’s media conglomerates. Indeed, it takes only a quick glance at the consumer market for entertainment goods to see the justification of such a conclusion.

Transmedial entertainment serves as the ultimate manifestation of content streaming, erasing as it does the boundaries between various media platforms and narratological modes. With a different terminology, content streaming can be said to make up what Espen Aarseth (2006) labels cross-media productions, or what Marc Ruppel (2009) calls cross-sited narratives (see previous chapter, “Transmedial worlds of entertainment”). In line with Murray (2003; 2005), Aarseth (2006) points to the tendency in entertainment businesses to co-launch content on different media platforms. According to Aarseth, such cross-media productions can be either strong or weak. Strong cross-media productions are said to produce the media versions in “parallel”, whereas the weak versions take place sequentially, “as a migration between media, and where the first instance usually is seen as the original content” (Aarseth, 2006, p. 205). In other words, strong
cross-media production would equal transmedia storytelling while weak cross-media production would be closer to adaptation. But, Aarseth points out, the lines between adaptation and cross-media production can be difficult to draw, “as many works may have been made with cross-media migration in mind” (2006, p. 205).

According to Murray (2005), content streaming strategies constitute a response to an existent paradox within the contemporary entertainment industry. On the one hand, audiences tend to put increasingly higher demands on the entertainment commodities, in terms of, for example, special effects, high resolution images, crystal clear sound, immersive game experiences, etc., which cause already high production costs to climb even higher. On the other hand, due to their fragmentation over multiple platforms, today’s audiences do not “provide the mass revenues of broad-scale demographic penetration” (Murray, 2005, p. 420). Thus, the fragmented and progressively more niche audiences need to be targeted on several platforms. This can be related to Göran Bolin’s (2010a) argument that the industry, even in today’s highly fragmented media landscape, is still in search of the “mass” audience, albeit one dispersed over a range of more or less personalized and niched media (more on this to in the next chapter). As Murray explains then, content streaming corresponds to a wish within the industry to win back economics of scale (2005, p. 421). A similar explanation is provided by Aarseth, who claims that:

The Walt Disney era’s focus on end-user experience has been replaced by the entertainment industry’s need to minimize risk in the face of rising cost of production and advertising, which means that no stand-alone product, whether film, game, or even comic book is worth risking the investment (2006, p. 203).

Thus, product diversification and content streaming constitute responses to high production costs and the perceived level of risk in the industry. Through conglomeration, networking and the installment of strategic alliances between companies inside and outside of the entertainment industry, and on local and global markets, risk certainly becomes something that is shared by many.

4.4 ‘Webs of interdependence’: Conglomerates, networks and alliances

The concept of ‘ancillary markets’ has become increasingly problematic in the transmedial entertainment era, at least when taken to mean subsidiary or secondary markets. Historically, box office has constituted the number one revenue source for Hollywood studios. Today, it accounts for less than 15 percent of total revenues. The remaining 85 percent comes from so called ancillary markets, like cable, satellite or network television, DVDs or soundtracks. While
the film within a franchise might have the greatest potential of all commodities to “pull” the rest of commodities, serving as a ‘tent-pole’, it is increasingly difficult to build hierarchies in terms of more or less important platforms (Drake, 2008). In today’s industry, entertainment is often the result of collaboration between different divisions or companies already from start (Jenkins, 2006a; Deuze, 2007; Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

A conglomerate holds the advantage of containing a range of different divisions between which risks can be spread and from which multiple revenue streams may flow (Meehan, 1991). With considerations to synergy, or “tight diversification” (Schatz, 2008), it would be considered a “waste” of resources for a conglomerate if the content created in the film division, for example, did not translate into a game, a television program or a comic book. With every expansion of the conglomerate’s holdings, new sources of revenues are added as more opportunities for recycling emerge (Meehan, 2000; Doyle, 2002). Again, in times of audience fragmentation, the conglomerated company manages to recreate economies of scale through diversification. Or, as explained by John T. Caldwell: “As the possibilities of a mass audience fades, and as production costs sky rocket beyond the budgetary abilities of a single, company, corporations must cross-collateralize any new content development for as many ancillary venues and markets as possible” (2006, p. 123).

With the increased levels of commercial intertextuality that occur from this recycling added to the picture, it becomes clear that the conglomerate infrastructure – created through processes of spatialization – makes up the perfect soil for entertainment franchises (Meehan, 1991; 2000; Mosco, 1996). That the entertainment industry is dominated by a handful of giant transnational conglomerates (Bagdikian, 1997; Doyle, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Vogel, 2007; McChesney, 2008), however, does not mean that smaller companies have ceased to exist. As stressed by Hesmondhalgh (2007), they are even multiplying. Yet, what is significant today is that multidivisional conglomerates and small “independents” are increasingly inter-reliant. As explained by Hesmondhalgh: “While cultural industry companies compete with each other, at the same time, they operate complex webs of joint ventures and ownership” (2007, p. 177). With purposes such as avoiding competition, saving money and sharing risks, companies of various scope and origin form complex “webs of interdependence” (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 176).

Through various kinds of strategic alliances and partnerships, today’s entertainment industry has come to constitute a “global network” of corporations (Compaine & Gomery, 2000; Chan-Olmsted & Chang, 2003; Chon, Choi, Bar-
In this network, processes of globalization and localization are simultaneously ongoing, as “Regional players are actively importing global content and localizing it; and global media organizations are pursuing local partners in order to deliver customized content to audiences” (Arsenault & Castells, 2008, p. 722). Writing on the contemporary Hollywood film industry, Aida Hozic (2001) make similar observations. The dispersed production of film, manifested in various kinds of limited partnerships and pre-sales arrangements have caused different sectors of the entertainment business to become intertwined within a “commercial network of international financers and distributors” (Hozic, 2001, p. 105). As argued by Amelia H. Arsenault and Manuel Castells (2008, p. 714), then, “multi-media conglomerates simultaneously compete and collude on a case-by-case basis according to their business needs”. Thus, the business strategy of today’s multi-media conglomerates is characterized by “collaboration with rivals”, or co-opetition (Arsenault & Castells, 2008, p. 722) rather than competition.

Ultimately, the existence of these networks, between different industrials sectors and between different regions of the world, means that huge conglomerates like Time Warner, News Corporation or Disney have a reach that goes far beyond their actual holdings (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Deals with financial actors make up a substantial part of this global network, as do various kinds of licensing and advertising partnerships, such as merchandising, tie-ins and product placements (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). As noted by Miller et al (2001), textual gatekeepers, such as marketability, encourages film companies to go into partnership with a range of more or less related businesses for the sake of promotion. As the writers observe:

An important effect of marketing’s textual gatekeeping is the multiplication of corporate partnerships that result from cross-promotion and merchandising deals. The potential links to retail marketers can be indexed to the level of marketability found in a film project. Greater marketability not only means more film elements congenial to advertising, but also entails more partnerships with consumer goods and services corporations (Miller, et al., 2001, p. 157).

The will to produce all-encompassing franchises rather than single films, then, has caused the trade with intellectual property rights to bloom. This means that the business of licensing has grown in importance over the last few decades, enabling a steady stream of branded products to be put on market.
4.5 The flow of things: Intellectual property and licensing

Licensing has been described as a “legal mechanism by which one party legally obligates itself to pay the holder of a copyright or trademark a specific royalty in order to use a name, likeness or image”, or in fewer words, as “the process of selling or buying property rights to produce commodities based on a copyright product” (Wasko, 1994, p. 203). Ultimately, licensing serves a double function: it is at the same time a source of income and a form of promotion (Meehan, 1991). As such, it becomes an effective strategy for entertainment companies to cope with potential failures.

When advertising is accompanied by licensing in a promotional campaign, the producing company has the opportunity of earning revenues from licenses to toy companies, clothes manufacturers, fast food chains, etc., even if the film flops. Licensing is increasingly used, then, to augment revenues and licensed products are used to augment advertising for the film (Meehan, 1991, p. 57).

Each reincarnation of an entertainment brand, then, serves as an extra, and sometimes crucial, source of income to the copyright holder (Vogel, 2007; McDonald & Wasko, 2008). Therefore, Hollywood and other entertainment businesses are “not really based on the production of things so much as the control of the rights to use those things” (McDonald & Wasko, 2008, p. 5). Thus, it is the intellectual property that is at the core of the entertainment economy, and it is the trading of the rights over these properties that make the money flow in the industry. As observed by Hozic: “Since profits are mostly made through presales of rights to films, images, and characters, the creation of brand names and the struggle over copyright and royalties have become the main source of tension in Hollywood” (2001, p. 127). When in possession of these immaterial rights, companies hold the rights to reproduce branded content over and over.

As articulated by Scott Lash and Celia Lury, “Intellectual property law […] increasingly makes possible an exclusive monopoly of not simply a static sign, but of a sign that is an entry into, an opening onto, a flow of things […]” (2008, p. 150). Such a “flow of things” definitely emerges through the intimately related practice of merchandising, which refers to “the mechanical act of making or selling a product based on a copyrightable product” (Wasko, 1994, p. 203). Merchandise, in turn, is sometimes hard to separate from so called tie-ins. While merchandise usually is somewhat closely related to the media production on which it is based (such as a film or a game), tie-ins are more far-removed from the entertainment itself and solely connected to it through promotion campaigns. With this definition, then, a Shrek costume would count as merchandise,
while a coupon from Burger King included in the *Shrek* DVD would be a tie-in (Wasko, 1994).

As a result of the centrality of intellectual property rights, the licensing industry has grown huge over the last few decades (Pecora, 1998; Lash & Lury, 2008). Ever since blockbusters *Jaws* and *Star Wars* appeared on theatres in the late 1970s, the buying and selling of licenses connected to characters and concepts is elementary within the industry (Vogel, 2007). Steven Kline describes how the discovery of the importance of characters and stories to children’s entertainment, primarily made in the 1980s, came to transform the ways in which entertainment is produced:

Instead of simply finding a suitable and popular TV programme to sponsor, or waiting for a popular series to survive a season and then creating spin-off characters in the time-honored fashion, toy makers and licensing agents got together early on to develop their own ‘property’ – their own TV characters and program concept (1993, p. 196).

*Transformers*, *He-Man and the Masters of Universe* and *My Little Pony* are among the brands that were born in this spirit. The primary task of these brand, Kline (1993) points out, is not primarily to entertain but to bring in capital. Like Mehan (1991; 2000), he acknowledges the advertising function of licensed material:

Character fiction must serve as the marketing functions of introducing a new range of personalities into children’s culture, orienting children to this product line, creating a sense of excitement about these characters, and ultimately leading children to want to use those characters in play. […] It is simply not sufficient for a programme to be popular with kids. The program must instill in them the promise of an imaginary world that can be entered not just by watching television but also by owning and playing with a specific toy line (Kline, 1993, p. 280).

Lash and Lury (2008) argue, partly in opposition to Horkheimer and Adorno (1997), that only recently have humanity begun to witness a “true industrialization of culture”. Due to the increased focus on brands and the enthusiasm for licensing, the contemporary entertainment industry is creating two kinds of

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6 That licensing deals can be highly lucrative for the copyright owner is evident for instance in the money involved in the *Batman* and *Harry Potter* properties. When *Batman* was released in 1989, Warner Bros. received licensing fees ranging from $2,000 to $50,000, plus royalties of eight to ten percent on revenues estimated of $250 million in the first year of release. Likewise, Mattel supposedly agreed in the year 2000 to pay Warner Bros. a $35 million advance and a 15 percent royalty for toy rights to the *Harry Potter* book series (Vogel, 2007, p. 156, footnote no. 66). A central product license to a major toy manufacturing company might return at least six to seven percent of wholesale merchandise revenues to a film studio, and merchandise license profits for major releases such as Disney’s animated features *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King* and Universal’s (MCA) *Jurassic Park* can easily exceed $100 million (Vogel, 2007, p. 132).
movements for cultural object: the “thingification of the media” and “the medi-
ation of things” (Lash & Lury, 2008, p. 85). Character licensing serves as the perhaps most obvious manifestation of how both kinds of movements come into existence. This phenomenon, by which the rights to use a name or an image in exchange for a royalty fee, has grown increasingly important to the toy business as well as for the media industries (Kline, 1993; Pecora, 1998). For the toy business, character licensing creates recognizable characters and free promotion (in the shape of TV-programs, games or films, etc.). For the media industry, these kinds of arrangements bring in extra money and increase brand visibility. Having followed the development of the LEGO property from building-blocks to complex media platforms, Stig Hjavard (2004) identifies an increasing trend of what he calls a *mediatization of toys*, spurred by processes of globalization and commercialization and facilitated through licensing and story-development.

4.6 The blending of content and promotion

*Production*, involving the stages of creation and reproduction, and *circulation*, involving practices and efforts through which cultural commodities are presented to potential customers (that is, marketing, publicity, distribution and wholesaling) constitute the two necessary cycles of capitalist accumulation (Ryan, 1992, p. 103; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Earlier in this chapter it was pointed out that ‘marketability’ has become an increasingly important criterion when deciding what entertainment commodities to produce and what not (Wyatt, 1994/2006; Miller, et al., 2001; Vogel, 2007). As noted, it encourages the production of films that contain elements which can be easily transported into advertisements, posters, commercials, trailers etc., and this, in turn, renders a diffusion of borders between the cycle of production and the cycle of circulation. Today, marketing is something that comes into action not only in the post-production stages of filmmaking, but already in the pre-production stages. As Miller et al explain, this means “effectively merging distribution into production and blurring the old scalar and spatial divisions of this labour process” (2001, p. 155).

Again, the growing investment in promotional activities and distribution can be understood in relation to the existence of risk in cultural production (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 24). As a consequence of an overproduction of titles relative to demand, the cultural marketplace is commonly muddled with competitive commodities. Due to this, and to the fact that the use value of cultural commodities declines with time, marketing has come to play an increasingly important role in attracting sales (Ryan, 1992). Writing about the film industry
in particular, Drake too emphasizes the central function of marketing “to establish product recognition and differentiation, and attempt to reduce these risks by highlighting the marketable elements prior to a film’s release” (2008, p. 64). Indeed, the film industry provides the perhaps most obvious grounds for any claim regarding the growing significance of circulation practices.

With a focus on “Hollywood’s promotional culture of production”, Paul Grainge (2008, p. 7) tells how marketing departments have gained increased powers within film companies and how marketing budgets have escalated in the last few decades, much due to increased conglomeration and, especially, the growing concerns with synergy and control over rights within the industry. The 1989 film version of *Batman* has been described as groundbreaking when it comes to film marketing. From this time forward, films have largely been treated as ‘franchise events’ (Grainge, 2008, p. 130), coming into being by through complex partnerships with beverage companies, car manufacturers and other entertainment businesses.

Through increasingly sophisticated alliances and collaborations, films become both subject to and media for marketing of various sorts. The film is sold by the help of paratexts such as advertisements, posters, trailers and websites at the same time as it may help promote external commodities or brands – thereby, potentially, taking the function of a paratext itself. While not a new phenomenon, brands are becoming increasingly noticeable not only as entertainment content (cf. Scolari, 2009) but also within entertainment content, ranging from films to TV-programs to computer games to books (Balasubramanian, 1994; Gupta & Gould, 1997; Karrh, 1998; Avery & Ferraro, 2000; Karrh, McKee, & Pardun, 2003; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005; Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2006; Hudson & Hudson, 2006). When logotypes, brand names and products are inserted into mediated content this is rarely random. As claimed by Jansson, there are strong

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7 As Jay Newell et al concludes from their study of the history of ‘product placement’, this had been used as a sophisticated marketing technique long before Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.* famously advertised Reese’s Pieces candy in 1982 (2006). As their results show, product placement in films is as old as the motion picture industry itself.

8 The reasons for inserting brands into entertainment content are many. For the advertiser, the wish to transfer some of the “magic” from, for instance, a film, program or game to the brand or product might serve as a key motif, as might the ambition to use the placement as a bond to a more encompassing promotional campaign (for example a tie-in campaign) (Karrh, 1998; Russell, 1998). An equally important reason for the advertiser to invest in this kind of embedded marketing would be that it constitutes a type of advertising that cannot easily be avoided by the audience (in comparison with for example the traditional TV-commercial which is always just a “zapp” away from being ignored) (Avery & Ferraro, 2000; Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2006). As for the producer, the most obvious motif behind placement deals would be the need for extra production money (Schneider & Cornwell, 2005), although the use of brand names are occasionally also motivated as a way to enhance the “realism” of the entertainment content by reflecting the contemporary situation with ever-present brand names and logotypes (Avery & Ferraro, 2000; Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2006).
desires within the industry to control how the promotional webs of commercial intertextuality are woven, and the strategic placement of products and brands within entertainment constitute a type of “industrially encoded intertextuality” (2002, p. 19).

As James Karrh suggests, brand placement can be defined as “the paid inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers, through audio and/or visual means, within mass media programming” (1998, p. 33). The concept is commonly replaced by the term product placement, yet as argued by Karrh, this is not very satisfying as “it is generally a particular brand, rather than a product type, which is highlighted (Ray-Bans versus sunglasses)” (1998, p. 32). To Chris Hackley and Rungpaka Tiwsakul (2006, p. 63) brand placement, along with sponsorship, constitutes entertainment marketing: a hybrid kind of marketing where “the brand must appear as a part of the entertainment and not as an overt promotion”.

Siva K. Balasubramanian (1994, p. 30) chooses instead to use the term hybrid messages to account for brand placements, tie-ins, program-length commercials and all other “paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a non-commercial character”. Branded entertainment, embedded marketing and integrated advertising are further labels that have been used to account for brand placement and similar marketing communication practices (Hudson & Hudson, 2006).

Typically, the different labels used signal stronger or weaker links between brand and content. To account for these kinds of variations, Cristel A. Russell (1998) makes a distinction between seven placements (where the brand is visually positioned as part of the set), script placements (where the brand is mentioned only verbally) and plot placements (which make the brand an integral part of the story) (see also Karrh, et al., 2003). The third category would make up what Simon Hudson and David Hudson (2006) calls ‘branded entertainment’ – a more matured and sophisticated form of brand placement. In line with previous observations presented in this thesis, they conclude that “[b]randed products are no longer just ‘placed’; they are woven into entertainment content making a stronger emotional connection with the consumer” (2006, p. 489). Ultimately then, various forms of branded entertainment renders “a convergence of advertising and entertainment” (Hudson & Hudson, 2006, p. 489).

4.7 Summary and concluding remarks

This chapter has aimed at exploring the economy of transmedial entertainment, and ultimately contributes to my analyses by providing concepts that enable me to consider Transformers as business. It has been argued that the notion of risk is
particularly important as one, but not the only, explanatory factor in trying to understand entertainment companies’ interests in building encompassing franchises. High production costs along with unpredictable consumer behaviors have given rise to strategies by which companies aim at producing high concept entertainment; that is, entertainment with a built-in potential to be successful. Marketability, positioning potential, playability and, perhaps most significantly, streamability are sought-for qualities in today’s entertainment properties and persuade companies to turn their eyes towards transmedial franchises. Importantly, such strategies can be said to constitute significant prerequisites for processes of commodification as well as spatialization, as they aim at investing the property with value (in the case of marketability, positioning and playability, most notable) and/or at expanding the property spatially (particularly evident in the case of streamability). Other prerequisites for the same type of processes, and for spatialization especially, come with the forming of complex networks of alliances and partnerships, which also largely can be explained with reference to the notion of risk. To a great extent these collaborations have promotional aims, something that becomes particularly obvious when they take the shape of licensing-, merchandising, tie-in, or brand placement deals.

Ultimately, the aim of entertainment industries is to create properties with a far reach in both time and space – they should have a long “shelf-life” as well as an extensive spatial reach. By offering a brand in constantly new forms – as film, game, toy line, clothing, comic book, etc. – chances increase that consumers will interact with that brand for a longer period of time. The facts that a film does not end with the closing credits but continues in other media platforms or product categories makes today’s entertainment properties particularly long-lasting. Likewise, the global network infrastructure of entertainment facilitates the distribution of brands to different geographical regions of the world as well as the growth across media platforms and product categories.

As mentioned initially in this chapter, closely aligned with the concept of risk is the notion of control. All risk-reduction strategies mentioned in this chapter are employed to increase control on different levels. Most significantly, the actors within the industry want to control how their properties are being presented and promoted to the consumers and, ultimately, how they become used by these. A great deal of the inherited uncertainty in the business of entertainment can be reduced if inconsistent consumers can be transformed into loyal consumers, and eventually into fans. The problem with fans, however, from the industries point of view, is that they do not always act according to the brand owners’ intentions. Fan are known for constituting an especially active kind of
audience that definitely want a say in how “their” favorite brand is being handled and who tend to re-work texts according to their own wishes. Thus, the industry’s interest in gaining and maintaining control over the brand is met by fans’ aims for the same. The next chapter seeks to understand (trans-)media fandom from a cultural and economic perspective, and provides further details on the, sometimes, intricate relationships between the industry and its most dedicated audiences.
5 World-building by fans

The previous chapter provided a theoretical framework to why and how transmedial worlds of entertainment are created, expanded and maintained by the industry. As argued, the companies within the entertainment industry have many reasons for keeping these worlds in steady growth and its components in constant circulation. The risk factor and the search for never-ending cash-flows drive companies into increasingly sophisticated partnerships and alliances across the industrial spectrum. The result is a highly networked entertainment economy, with tentacles reaching far outside the traditional entertainment domain as well as across the globe. Yet, the partnerships that the entertainment companies invest in do not limit themselves to other businesses. Consumers too insert fundamental building blocks into these worlds of entertainment, and they too contribute to their constant expansion and circulation. They do so because they love these brand universes – because they enjoy writing fiction, making reviews, creating videos, participating in forum chats, arranging conventions, building websites, drawing art, and so forth. In short, they do so because they are fans of these brands.

The potential gratifications of media consumption in general and fandom in particular have been accentuated within the cultural studies tradition for a long period of time (cf. Blumer & Katz, 1974; Morley, 1980; Brunsdon, 1981; 1986; Ang, 1985; Radway, 1987; Fiske, 1989; 1997b; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Gray, 1992; Jenkins, 1992a; 1992b; 2006a; Harrington & Bichly, 1995; Baym, 1998; 2000; Lancaster, 2001; Gray, 2006). Especially, reception studies identifying the “active reader” have provided insights into media culture as a site of pleasure. Ultimately, the fact that all commodities are simultaneously economic and cultural generates brand worlds which are co-built by professional producers and fans. Both parties contribute to the thickening of the intertextual and paratextual webs constituting these fictional universes, by constantly adding new textual components. While the industry adds official, or authorized, components to these webs, the fans enrich them their own unofficial, or unauthorized, dittos. Today, when advanced media and communication technology has become increasingly available to consumers, the differences between industry-produced and fan-produced content, or paratexts, are diminishing. As observed by Cornel Sandvoss, “media professionals and audiences now share communicative spaces offering sometimes conflicting paratexts [...]” (2011, p. 75).

From one perspective, as told in the introduction to this thesis, this could be an indication of a flattened hierarchy between professionals and amateurs, by
which previously deep-rooted power-structures are being challenged. Consumers, it could be claimed, today stand the chance of becoming increasingly empowered vis-à-vis the industry. From a different perspective, however, the change is not so revolutionary and exiting. While it would be hard to deny that the producer and consumer roles are converging – given its manifestation in a multitude of sites – it might be too hasty to celebrate this in terms of increased consumer empowerment. As many researchers have pointed out, audience productivity can also be spoken of in terms of consumer exploitation (cf. Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2007; Baym, 2009; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Yang, 2009; Fuchs, 2010; Martens, 2011; Sandvoss, 2011). It is true that fans produce content with inspiration from their objects of fandom because they enjoy doing so. However, they also do this because they are encouraged to by marketing departments. Hence, fans might produce their own commercials because they are keen on film production or/and because they want to win a contest arranged by the brand owner. They might sign up for an e-mail list because they enjoy communicating with other fans or/and because they have to in order to become member of an official club. Importantly, the wide range of consumer paratexts circulating within brand universes can be claimed to add more to these webs than merely increased density. Most notably, they add to the visibility and hype of the brand (cf. Baym, 2009, Gray, 2010), whereby, in effect, fan productivity comes to serve as free promotion for the brand, and as free labor (Terranova, 2000) for the industry.

If the previous chapter focused on the industry’s strategic treatment of these worlds of entertainment, this chapter seeks to highlight the consumer-side of these phenomena. Yet, again, due to the convergence of roles between producers and consumers, any attempt to distinguish the two sides, as if they were entirely separate would indeed be artificial. Again, a main argument in this thesis is that professionals and amateurs do not work on these universes in parallel but in a close, rather brail, relationship. Therefore, while the key theoretical focus in this chapter is on fans and fandom – “phenomena” traditionally thought of in terms of consumption (albeit “productive consumption”) – my ambition has been to provide an account of how industry and fans are always allied, both in harmony and in conflict.

Now, fans, as this chapter will tell, constitute a particular kind of audience (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b, 2006a; Baym, 1998; 2000; Hills, 2002; Staiger, 2005; Nikunen, 2007; Sandvoss, 2011). Far from all media consumers behave as fans do, and this is an important insight to keep in mind when reading this chapter as well as the thesis as a whole. So, why focus on this specific sub-
category of consumers in this thesis? The reason can be said to be two-folded, at least. First, as my research purpose includes a question of how worlds of transmedial entertainment in the era of convergence are built jointly by consumers and producers, it seems logical to turn the attention to those who, more than any other consumer group, can be expected to partake in this building. On the other hand, and here is my second reason for focusing on the fan group: as my forthcoming analyses will show, today’s brand worlds seem to aim at turning every consumer into a loyal and dedicated fan – not least by encouraging different versions of transmedial entertainment. Thus, while a few years ago, a strictly fan-focused orientation might have seemed too narrow, in the contemporary entertainment industry, and with the mainstreaming of user-generated activity, it is probably by looking at this consumer group that we can understand more about tomorrow’s consumers. Or, as expressed by William Urrichio: “Ideal readers of a sort, their tolerances and abilities to shift with texts across media forms suggests in extremis the conditions which an average audience should be able to tolerate” (2004, p. 142). In relation to this development, and with reference to the work delivered by Henry Jenkins (2003; 2004) and Steve Baily (2002), Kaarina Nikunen finds it legitimate to speak about an ongoing ‘fanification of audiences’:

Fan cultures seem to be at the very heart of media change, embodying the technological convergence seen now in the parallel use of Internet and television by fan communities thus possibly reshaping audience practices more widely. Fans have even been considered as the pioneers of future audiences, predicting transformation in audience practices – something that might be referred to as the ‘fanification of audiences’ (2007, p. 111, my emphasis).

5.1 Borrowed culture: The industry – audience relationship

The relationship between the entertainment industry and its audiences is indeed complicated. At the bottom line, it is characterized by a constant giving-and-taking between the both parties: the industry provides the audience with commodities from which they can build their own cultures, while the audience supply the industry, not only with money, but also with cultural influences which – to a greater or lesser extent – shape these commodities (Hebdige, 1979/1988; Fiske, 1992). Entertainment products, then, like all other commodities, have both economic and cultural value (Murdock, 1997). The branded commodities produced by the industry carry the potential of generating economic profit for companies, but also other kinds of values for the audiences. Hence, in the words of John Fiske, “There are [...] contradictory functions performed by cultural commodities which on the one hand serve the economic interests of
the industry and on the other the cultural interests of the [audience]” (1992, p. 47).

Naturally, if commodities did never afford any kind of pleasure, satisfaction or gratification to the consumer, they would hardly be purchased in the first place. Yet, more than affording a moment of entertainment – or, as would be more likely in these days of transmedial entertainment: a stream of moments – these branded commodities also become used by individuals and collectives to build and express style, identity and communion (Hebdige, 1979/1988; Fornäs, 1992; Bjurström, 1997). Recognizing the innate creativeness of audiences, Lawrence Grossberg states that: “Audiences are constantly making their own cultural environment from the cultural resources that are available to them” (1992, p. 53). In a similar acknowledgment of the highly active audience, Fiske announces that everything that we refer to as ‘popular culture’ is in fact “produced by the people out of the products of the cultural industries” (1992, p. 37). Thus, the entertainment industry provides its audiences with raw material – images, sounds, signs and stories – from which various types of subcultures are created. As made manifest by Dick Hebdige (1979/1988), even radical or ‘authentic’ subcultures like the punks, mods or skinheads were built from material produced by commercial culture. What these subcultures did was to appropriate, or rework, this material to the extent that new meanings and expressions were created. In other words, they “made do” with what the system provided (Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 1992b).

As suggested by Fiske, the notion of excorporation is useful when accounting for the relationship between the dominant and subordinated cultures in this context:

Excorporation is the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system, and this is central to popular culture, for in an industrial society the only resources from which the subordinate can make their own subcultures are those provided by the system that subordinates them. There is no “authentic” folk culture to provide an alternative, and so popular culture is necessarily the art of making do with what is available (1989, p. 15).

At the same time, companies seek to incorporate the subcultural (Hebdige, 1979/1988; Fiske, 1989). In the same way that audiences are also producers, producers are always also audiences (Caldwell, 2006). As explained by Hebdige, “Each new subculture establishes new trends, generates new looks and sounds which feed back into the appropriate industries” (1979/1988, p. 95). So were the once so provocative styles and expressions of the punk subculture, for example, soon reinstalled in commercial culture, inspiring new clothing collec-
tions and music productions from which companies could profit. However, such an incorporation of subcultural inventions can take place only when the subculture has been somewhat ‘normalized’ by the media, Hebdige explains: “Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise” (1979/1988, p. 96). This transformation of the subculture, then, from the Other to the mainstream, constitutes not only an economic incorporation but an ideological one as well.

Over the last couple of decades, the incorporation process has become increasingly sophisticated and professionalized. Since the 1990s, so called ‘cool hunters’ are employed at marketing departments to keep a constant eye on what happens on, especially, the youth market in terms of new trends and fashions. Through focus groups, web surveys, interviews and other consumer research, these hunters supervise what goes on in the margins of popular culture (Klein, 2002, p. 103f; Tungate, 2005). Thus, if a new subculture was to emerge somewhere out there, companies would soon know about it and find ways to make money from it. In today’s online environment, in which the borders between consumers and producers are becoming increasingly diffused, the possibilities for incorporation are increasing even more. As this chapter will expound in further detail, companies are becoming progressively more aware of how subcultures may be exploited for commercial purposes. Not only do companies today recuperate “cool” styles and tastes from the subcultural; they also take direct control over different types of user-generated content created within these cultures (cf. Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2007; 2009; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Martens, 2011).

Thus, the industry-audience relationship is caught up in “feedback loop” by which audiences ‘extrporate’ the products from the industry and the industry ‘incorporate’ styles and tastes from the audiences (Fiske, 1992, p. 47). However, despite the images of harmony that any acknowledgement of such a symbiotic relationship might bring forth, this is a relationship marked by conflict as much as by mutual exchange. On the one hand, corporations do not necessarily approve of everything that consumers “take out” from them – as when brand names are used without legal permission or when intellectual properties, such as films, music, photos or games, are illegally distributed. On the other hand, audiences are not always content with their cultural expressions and creations being commercialized (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; Staiger, 2005).
Struggles concerning these issues exist in the entire popular culture sphere yet tend to be particularly noisy within the specific type of subculture, or ‘alternative community’, (Jenkins, 1992b) known as *fandom* (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; 2006b; Hills, 2002; Johnson, 2007). More than any other consumer group, fans participate in the construction of transmedial worlds of entertainment – in consensus and in conflict with the industry. The industrially produced text, as suggested by Matt Hills, forms a *hyperdiegetic* world: “a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of logic and extension” (2002, p. 137). Thus, only pieces of the hyperdiegetic world becomes visible to us as we watch the film, play the game or read the comic book, yet all pieces are marked by coherence and continuity. This industrially produced world has its fan-produced equivalent in what Henry Jenkins describes as the *meta-text* (1992b, p. 98). This meta-text, created by the fans collectively, constitute the “ideal” version of a world “against which a film or episode is evaluated” (Jenkins, 1992b, p. 98). It is created through careful analyses of the information that the industrially produced texts provide and through speculations and extrapolations. As explained by Jenkins in relation to the *Star Trek* meta-text: “Episodes are viewed negatively if they contradict information fans assume to be true about the series world of if they develop the program in directions frustrating fans’ own sense of its ‘potentials’” (1992b, p. 103). For example, fans tend to be displeased with contradictions in the narrative or with unexplained shifts in the program format.

As these “flaws” are identified by what Jenkins calls the ‘fan community’ (1992b), the fans’ and the industry’s interest clash. Yet, as stressed by Johnson (2007), since there are fractions even within a fan community, many meta-texts exist simultaneously. As he points out, with reference to both Hill’s (2002) and Jenkins’ (1992) conceptualizations, “Events in hyperdiegetic continuity that please one fan or interest group conflict with competing meta-textual interests of another. Co-present meta-texts, therefore, necessarily exist in opposition” (Johnson, 2007, p. 286). In order to account for the discursive conflicts going on both internally – among fans – and externally – between fans and producers – Johnson suggests we use the label *fan-agonism* (2007, p. 287).

5.2 Images of fandom: From cultural dupes to productive rebels

Hence, as argued above, fans and producers live in an ambiguous relationship. Similar arguments can be raised concerning the relationship between fans and academics. Traditionally, the media and the academy have been united by their
equally depressive views of fans and fandom (Jenson, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; Hills, 2002; Gray, 2007). Through film, television and press, the fan has been presented as a dangerous, abnormal and rather unintelligent kind of person. In research, the fan has been treated as an audience member who is more than usually passive and controlled; an easy target for both media manipulation and consumerism (Jenson, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; Hills, 2002; Gray, 2007). Thus, the fact that “there is very little literature that explores fandom as a normal, everyday cultural or social phenomenon” has left us with an omnipresent image of the fan as Other (Jenson, 1992, p. 13; Gray, 2007, p. 2).

As both Joli Jenson (1992) and Henry Jenkins (1992b) have argued, these negative representations of fans and fandom are probably connected to the term’s original meaning and later connotations. The word ‘fan’ is after all an abbreviation of ‘fanatic’, which over time has become used as a label for people who are more than healthily “obsessed” with, primarily, religious or political matters. Thus, in spite of all the time that has flown since the term appeared for the first time, fandom is still sometimes associated with fanaticism, deranged behavior, false beliefs or other negative personality traits. However, as also acknowledged by Jenson and Jenkins, these negative images of fandom cannot be understood unless we connect them to the poor status of the popular culture texts themselves. Indeed, popular culture – to which fandom is exclusively associated – has traditionally been regarded as the “lowest” kind of culture, perceivably capable of attracting only the “least critical” and “most passive” segments of the population (Fiske, 1992; Grossberg, 1992). As suggested earlier in this thesis, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory on ‘taste’ has been found useful to explain the status of fandom in relation to official culture (cf. Fiske, 1992; Thornton, 1995). Most importantly in this context, Bourdieu (1984) has taught us that taste is never universal or eternal but changes with levels of economic and cultural capital. Inspired by Bourdieu, yet with the adding of the dimensions of “gender”, “age” and “race”, Fiske makes the following observation:

Fandom is typically associated with cultural forms that the dominant value system denigrates – pop music, romance novels, comics, Hollywood mass-appeal stars (sport, probably because of its appeal to masculinity, is an exception). It is thus associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race (1992, p. 30).

Insights such as these, that fandom constitutes a culture for the subordinated or disempowered largely helped overturn the negative representations of fans – at least in certain academic circles (most notably within the cultural studies tradition). For, what they did was to encourage academic discourses on fans as a
particularly resistant type of audience and of fandom as a site for important power struggles against the cultural elites and their tastes (Gray, 2007). From this perspective, fandom was not primarily regarded as “opium” for the people, but rather “a slap in the face” of the bourgeois. As a consequence hereof, fan studies became “a purposeful political intervention that sided with the tactics of fan audiences in their evasion of dominant ideologies, and that set out to rigorously defend fan communities against their ridicule in the mass media and by non-fans” (Gray, 2007, p. 2). Thus, Fiske and other early fan researchers managed to legitimize and de-trivialize not only fandom itself but also the research conducted on it. In this fandom is beautiful-phase, as Jonathan Gray aptly labels this period in fan studies, the fan was still treated as Other yet the activities with which this Other occupied herself were significantly re-evaluated (2007, p. 3). According to Gray, “early fan studies (and much of the work it inspired) often turned to the very activities and practices – convention attendance, fan fiction writing, fanzine editing and collection, letter-writing campaigns – that had been coded as pathological, and attempted to redeem them as creative, thoughtful, and productive” (2007, p. 3).

In addition to the ideas provoked by Bourdieu’s sociology, many researchers in what Gray identifies as the “first wave” (2007, p. 1) of fan studies gained inspiration from Michael de Certeau (1984), according to whom the audience is far from the passive mass once visualized by the Frankfurt school and other critical theorists. Instead, de Certeau argues, audiences do active, alternative and appropriative readings of texts – they even act as rebels, “poaching” industrial properties: “[…] readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves” (1984, p. 174). Fans thus became viewed not as a particularly passive, non-critical type of audience but rather as a highly reflective and productive kind of audience. This perception of fandom has been especially developed by Fiske, who defines this audienceship as follows:

Fandom is a common feature of popular culture in industrial societies. It selects from the repertoire of mass produced and mass-distributed entertainment performers, narratives or genres and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people. They are then reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of the more ‘normal’ popular audiences (1992, p. 30).

Hence, fans are understood to be “particularly productive” (Fiske, 1992, p. 37) consumers, whose involvement with the commercial text is so deep that the
“moment of reception becomes the moment of production” (Fiske, 1992, p. 41). To reiterate what was mentioned in chapter 3 in this thesis (“Trans medial worlds of entertainment”); according to Fiske this fan creativity is sort of “built-into” the popular culture text itself as this type of text, in contrast to avant-garde, high-brow texts, is never complete but always full of gaps. Popular culture texts, as he claims, are “producerly” (Fiske, 1997b). Drawing on Charlotte Brunsdon’s (1981; 1986) discovery of the “competent” soap opera reader as well as on Bourdieu’s metaphor of ‘cultural capital’, Fiske, as mentioned, also stresses that cultural competence, or ‘popular culture capital’ (1997, p. 18), is an important ingredient when trying to make a popular culture text meaningful.

This understanding of fandom, as an extraordinarily productive type of audience, is indeed shared by Jenkins (cf. 1992b; 2006a; 2006b). He too sees fandom as involving specific reception practices, not common to the larger mainstream audience. As he has succinctly explained: “Media fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate” (Jenkins, 1992a, p. 208). Like Fiske, Jenkins draws on de Certeau, and especially upon his notion of poaching. As he claims, while all audiences may be involved in different kinds of textual poaching, fans have turned poaching “into an art form” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 60).

Thus, with the first generation of fan studies, the pendulum had indeed swung: from having been mocked and stigmatized both within and outside of the academia, fans were now celebrated as an important political force against hegemonic dominance. If, as Grossberg (1992) explains, the dominant academic and media image of the fan initially was that of a cultural dupe, now fans came to be represented as an elite audience, distinguished by their significantly productive kind of consumption.

9 Here, Fiske draws on Roland Barthes’s (1974) ideas on the ‘writerly’ text; texts that demand so much meaning making from the reader that she “is no longer a consumer but a producer of the text”.
5.2.1 A taxonomy of fan productivity: Semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity

As anthropology-inspired cultural studies scholars have argued, all consumption by necessity involves some kind of “making” (cf. Hall, 1973/1980; Morley, 1980; Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1992; 1997a; 1997b; Grossberg, 1992; Liebes & Katz, 1993). In the process of decoding a text, meanings are always created. The reading of a book, the viewing of a film or the playing of a game, are activities which produce pleasure, excitement or equally possible of course, anxiety or fright. This kind of ‘semiotic productivity’ (Fiske, 1992), then, is undertaken by both mainstream audiences and fans. Yet, if most popular culture consumers stop at this level of productivity, fans are known for going further. As suggested by Fiske (1992), apart from semiotic productivity, fans become distinguished from other audiences by engaging also in ‘enunciative’ and ‘textual productivity’. Together, these productive practices are claimed to give rise to what Fiske calls a shadow cultural economy:

All popular audiences engage in varying degrees of semiotic productivity, producing meanings and pleasures that pertain to their social situation out of the products of the culture industries. But fans often turn this semiotic productivity into some form of textual production that can circle among – and thus help to define – the fan community. Fans create a fan culture with its own systems of production and distribution that forms what I shall call a ‘shadow cultural economy’ that lies outside that of the cultural industries yet share features with them which more normal popular culture lacks (1992, p. 30).

As mentioned then, semiotic productivity, the first of Fiske’s categories of fan productivity, is not at all unique to fandom but is undertaken by everyone who opens a book or lays her eyes on the television screen. As explained by Fiske, this type of productivity “consist of the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity” (Fiske, 1992, p. 37). With inspiration from both Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Hall’s decoding model, Fiske refers to these meaning-making capabilities in turn as ‘semiotic power’; a type of reader power that can be contrasted against the economic power hold by the industry, or the dominant (Fiske, 1992; 1997). This power, he further claims, is also a source of pleasure for the audience as “Pleasure results from the production of meanings of the world and of self to serve the interest of the reader rather than those of the dominant” (Fiske, 1997b, p. 19).

In relation to this, the result of Tamar Liebes’ and Elihu Katz’s (1993) reception-study on Dallas-viewers can be mentioned. In this study, the researchers identified two main forms of involvement with the show: referential and critical. A
referential reading connects the show with *real life*. “Viewers”, they explain, “relate to characters as real people and in turn relate these real people to their own real worlds” (Liebes & Katz, 1993, p. 100). A critical reading, on the other hand, identifies the show as a *construction*; that is, as constituted by genre, formulae, conventions, narrative schemes, etc. This form of reading is in turn broken down into three sub-categories: semantic criticism (the ability to identify themes, messages and archetypes in the show), syntactic criticism (the ability to identify genre, dramatic functions, economic framing, etc.), and pragmatic criticism (self-awareness of one’s role as a reader) (Katz & Liebes, 1993).

If the fan, once having finished the ‘reading’ of a certain text, decides to *share* his or her interpretations with fellow fans, another type of productivity takes place. As suggested by Fiske: “Semiotic productivity […] is essentially interior; when the meanings made are spoken and shared within a face-to-face or oral culture they take a public form that may be called *enunciative productivity*” (1992, p. 8). “Fan talk”, he explains, “is the generation and circulation of meanings of the object of fandom within a local community” (Fiske, 1992, p. 38). Indeed, popular texts, such as *Dallas*, tend to “provoke conversations” (Liebes & Katz, 1993:151). As found by Liebes and Katz: “People urge each other to see it and legitimatize it as a social currency. In this process, people help each other to understand, interpret and form opinions about the program […]” (1993, p. 151). To Jenkins, this is the kind of productivity that constitutes fandom as a *particular interpretive community* in which texts are collectively decoded and made meaningful (see Fish, 1980, on ‘interpretive community’; Jenkins, 1992b). In Gray’s view (2010), fan discussions constitute paratexts of equivalent relevance as industrially produced paratexts, and in line with Jenkins (1992b), he recognizes their function as interpretative frameworks. Most significantly, he claims, fan talk circulates “intertextual frames” (Gray, 2010, p. 118) by which a new show or film, for instance, can be understood. Fans, thus, communicate intertextual knowledge and provide clues for each other, through references to other texts, on how to read a particular text.

According to Denise Bielby and C. Lee Harrington (1995), it is possible to make distinctions between four kinds of ‘fan talk’ (see also Staiger, 2005, p. 107ff). The first is *commentary*: “opinions or statements by viewers of what they find pleasurable, displeasurable, satisfying, or irritating” (1995, p. 85). This kind of fan talk establishes and reinforces group norms and thereby potentially influences who is excluded from or included in the community. *Speculation* comprises a second type of fan talk, described by Bielby and Harrington as “gossip about a given program in terms of character development, story-line potential, plot
twists and so forth” (1995, p. 85). Speculation often involves talk about extratextual matters, such as how a particular movie production proceeds or how celebrities live their lives. The third and the fourth type of fan talk, which as suggested by Janet Staiger could be considered a pair, is labeled request and diffusion. As Staiger explains: “People ask for and receive information. Such changes create obligations and status” (2005, p. 108). As a complement to Bielby’s and Harrington’s categorization, Staiger also suggests a fifth kind of fan conversation, recognition, referring to “the use of catch phrases or insider information that would identify the depth of knowledge that a ‘true’ fan would know” (2005, p. 108). As with the evaluative commentary, recognition talk becomes a means for revealing who really belongs to the community and what place in the ‘fandom hierarchy’ such a person would have. However, while verbal language is an important means by which to enunciate these meanings, it is not the only semiotic system available. As acknowledged by Fiske (1992), hair styles, clothing, make-up and accessories represent other ways of expressing fan identity and community.

Again, if we accept Fiske’s ideas, popular culture texts are incomplete in themselves and it is this specific characteristic that causes the third kind of fan productivity to emerge: textual productivity. It is this type of fan creativity – resulting in novels, videos, artworks, photos, and other fan works – that particularly adds to the already dense web of intertextuality and paratextuality constituting today’s transmedial worlds. Not always but often, these unofficial textual components are created with the same kind of perfection and sophistication as the official dittos. As pointed out by Fiske, “The key differences between the two are economic rather than once of competence, for fans do not write or produce their texts for money; indeed, their productivity typically costs them money” (1992, p. 39). As Fiske also argues, there are important differences between official and unofficial “texts” related to circulation as well. As he explains, “because fan texts are not produced for profit, they do not need to be mass-marketed, so unlike official culture, fan culture makes no attempt to circulate its texts outside its own community. They are ‘narrowcast’, not broadcast, texts” (Fiske, 1992, p. 39).

Since Fiske introduced this model of fan productivity it has been taken up by other scholars for analyses of fan creativity. In the subsequent section, I present an “updated” version of Fiske’s taxonomy by considering Cornel Sandvoss’s (2011) ideas on fan productivity in the “age of convergence”. As Sandvoss manages to show, Fiske’s pre-Internet model still hold legitimacy in an online environment marked by dissolving boundaries between consumption and pro-
duction. As will be evidenced, Sandvoss’s arguments will inevitably lead us back to matters discussed in previous theory chapters, especially the first one. For what he successfully does is to demonstrate how the changing textual landscape, with its heightened levels of inter- and paratextuality, puts up new possibilities as well as new challenges for fans and fandom. Together, Fiske’s and Sandvoss’s accounts of fan productivity have informed my analyses of *Transformers* in ways that will be further elaborated in my chapter on methods (see Chapter 6).

5.2.2 Fan productivity in the era of media convergence

While, as my earlier contextualization chapter suggested, the revolutionary potential of what Jenkins’ and followers calls ‘convergence culture’ (Jenkins, 2006a; Deuze, 2007; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008) might have been heavily exaggerated from time to time, since Fiske presented this model of fan productivity (1992) things have indeed happened that have changed the appearance of fandom. As noted by Jenkins, “new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels, and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (2006a, p. 18). Although the Internet has not bred entirely new kinds of fan productivity,¹⁰ has had an impact on how fandom is practised. In terms of *textual productivity*, by which Sandvoss begins his revision of Fiske’s model, important changes are said to have taken place (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 59f). As a summary of these changes, Sandvoss writes: “In online textual productivity the boundaries between industry and user generated content, between media institutions and their audiences, between fans and producers […] dissipate as fans operate as producers and media producers as fans” (2011, p. 67). Most significantly, the Internet has made textual productivity more visible – not only to other audiences but also to the industry professionals. As Gray observes, the online world is flooded with fan-made paratexts: “Type the name of almost any popular film or television program on Google, and beyond the first two or three links for official, industry-created paratexts, one will likely find

¹⁰ As Sandvoss (2011) argues, the fact that fans have become more visible online, should not be interpreted as if technology changes everything about fandom. Indeed, much of what we see of online fandom, such as fan fiction, fan art or filk, are phenomena that have histories that go way back in the pre-Internet era (cf. Jenkins, 1992a; Staiger, 2005; Sandvoss, 2011). As, for example, Staiger (2005) observes, evidence traces fandom all the way back to the 18th century, when literary fans wooed authors with letters and pilgrim trips. Similarly, opera singers in the 19th century as well as film actors in the early 20th were subject to fandom, and the first science fiction convention was held in 1936 (Cavicchi, 2007; see also Staiger, 2005).
several if not hundreds or thousands of pages with various forms of audience-created paratexts” (2010, p. 143). One the one hand, and as Sandvoss (2011) points out, this heightened visibility means trouble to fans as it may draw them into juridical litigations. Fan productivity can after all be considered copyright infringement or violation of intellectual property. On the other hand, and as suggested also by Rebecca Tushnet (2007, p. 60), the increased visibility of fan’s textual productivity might have led to higher degrees of tolerance of fan creativity from the industry. As argued by Sandvoss, fan’s online textual productivity renders more dialogue between fans and professionals; albeit dialogue potentially marked both by conflict and reciprocity.

As for the enunciative productivity, or the ‘fan talk’, I wish to begin by giving credit to Sandvoss for pointing to one important aspect, which would have consequences for any analysis of fan productivity, namely that the lines between textual and enunciative productivity are everything but sharp: “fanzines, for example, are often both a form of talk about the fan text and a type of fan text at the same time” (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 67f). That being said, Sandvoss stresses that “fan’s enunciative productivity online […] offers the symbolic resources for the formation of new and alternative communities” (2011, p. 68). These online communities are of different scope; yet what is common to most of them is that the absolute majority of its members will never meet face-to-face in their offline lives. As such, these communities are marked by voluntary “bond[s] between strangers” (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 69). In line with Jenkins (1992), Sandvoss points to the crucial role played by online communities in a globalized world in which earlier referents for identity have been windswept. As he claims, with reference to Zygmunt Bauman (2005): “In the ephemeral world of liquid modernity, community membership and identity are increasingly less predetermined but achieved and maintained through agency, including fans’ textual, enunciative and semiotic productivity” (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 69). Like textual productivity, enunciative productivity creates multiple points of contact between fans and professionals, providing, among other things, companies with “a present ready and largely unfiltered access to a captive audience” (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 71). However, as this thesis is an example of, online fan talk lies open not only to lurking companies but also to probing scholars. Writing about fan talk as paratext, Gray points to the value of investigating online fan discussions to find out “how textuality begins” (2010, p. 120). For, indeed, much of today’s fan talk about upcoming movies or events precedes companies’ major marketing campaigns by months.
Turning lastly to **semiotic productivity**, the interpreting and negotiating of texts, Sandvoss raises a crucial question: who reads, sees or listens to all of the contents that fans produce and make public online? As he observes, there are many more “lurkers” out there than artists. A fan video produced on YouTube, thus, might attract thousands or even millions of viewers, especially when featuring characters popular also among the “mainstream” audiences. “Similarly”, Sandvoss adds, “fan fora attract a substantially wider readership than its regular participants” (2011, p. 71). With reference to this, he argues that what Internet has changed is not so much the sizes of fan communities, but rather the ways in which fans read their fan objects:

The main impact of processes of media convergence on fan cultures […] lies in a changing textual field, one that is different to an offline environment: the sheer accessibility of texts online, partly resulting out of the dialogical structure of the Internet, promoting the easy sharing and availability of fans’ enunciative and textual productivity facilitates the role of the fan/reader as an ever more active agent in the construction of textual boundaries (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 73).

Thus, while fan readings have never been limited to one specific medium or even genre, now, in the era of transmedial entertainment and media convergence, fan objects, to increasing extents, are “constructed out of a plethora of different texts in and across different media” (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 23; see also Jenkins, 2006a). Like many other media texts, Sandvoss explains, fan objects “are constructed between different interconnected layers, lacking intersubjective textual boundaries” (2011, p. 73). In line with Gray (2010), he acknowledges how fans’ semiotic productivity is always informed by both “texts” and “paratexts”:

This matrix of source texts and paratexts forming the textual fields in which individual readers construct textual boundaries […] is facilitated to an unparalleled degree by the Internet. The Internet’s hypertextuality is the natural modus operandi of intertextuality articulated through texts and paratexts. Those with access to the Internet have, with limitations of linguistic barriers, unparalleled access to professionally and user generated paratexts (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 74).

To conclude, fan productivity according to Sandvoss (2011) has been altered by the Internet in at least three important respects. Textual productivity has become increasingly visible, enunciative productivity is in a higher degree than before carried out between “strangers”, and semiotic productivity is performed in an increasingly complex inter- and paratextual landscape.11 Then, what are

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11 However, as also stressed by Sandvoss, we must not only ask how Internet has changed fandom, but also how fandom has changed the online environment: “While transformed and made increasingly visible by the Internet, all these forms of productivity have in turn shaped the structure, purposes, uses and technological development of the new medium” (2011, p. 78).
the consequences of these changes for the fan-industry relationship? As argued by Sandvoss (2011), fan productivity in the twentieth first century enables more dialogue between professional producers and fans. This dialogue may certainly benefit the fans in some respects; providing them, for example, with news and other content for their online communities and with the possibility to influence producer decisions. However, while still stressing these positive aspects of fan creativity, Sandvoss also, as hinted above, recognizes how fan productivity, and particularly the textual and enunciative kinds, may serve the interests of the industry as well. As he acknowledges:

Enthusiast in any realm of cultural production are [...] confronted with the inescapable logic of the capitalist system: fans whose textual productivity holds commercial value to third parties, yet wish to opt out of the system of monetary exchange and preserve their fandom as non-commercial space, inevitably open themselves to the exploitative utilization of their productivity by others. Only if they subscribe to the principles of capitalist exchange in the first instance, are fans able to avoid such exploitation [...] (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 61).

While remaining positive to the productive aspects of fan practice, Jenkins also identifies the value of fan creativity to the industry: “The media industry is increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace, and in some cases they are seeking ways to channel the creative output of media fans to lower their production costs” (2006b, p. 134). In the section below, then, focus will necessarily have to shift from fandom as a site of empowering productivity to fandom as a site of labor. From such a perspective, fandom exists not so much in opposition to commodity culture but as part of it.

5.3 The pendulum (almost) swings back: Fandom as labor

The radically optimistic perspective on media audiences in general and fans in particular, delivered by de Certeau, Fiske, Jenkins and other “first wave” fan scholars, have been rigorously criticized and in important respects rightfully so. Most importantly, by emphasizing the empowering potential of fandom and by focusing on text and reception, the industry’s interest in creating fandom and profiting from it was to large extents neglected (Hills, 2002). Without returning to the indefensibly gloomy arguments about fans as cultural dupes and helpless victims to media manipulation, a new generation of critical researchers has successfully managed to point to some darker sides of fan productivity. In these cases, audience activity is not being interpreted in “celebratory” terms as ‘pleasure’, ‘empowerment’ or ‘emancipation’, but rather in relation to Marxist concepts like ‘labor’, ‘exploitation’ or ‘commodification’ (cf. Hills, 2002; Hum-
Indeed, despite some regularly published claims about fans giving the industry problems (as when they disrespect copyright law or misuse intellectual property) fans do perform various kinds of work that is potentially beneficial to companies in the entertainment industry. As pointed out by Milner, “fan culture would not exist without fan labor, and producers would not be so interested in fan culture if its proper management and appropriation did not have viable financial consequences for them” (2009, p. 494).

5.3.1 **Fandom as niche market and the cultivation of consumer activity**

In a recent article on sports team supporters, Matthew Guschwan (2012) stresses the concurrently pleasurable and exploitive potentials of fan practices. From a fandom perspective – advocated not least by Hebdige (1979/1988), Fiske (cf. 1989; 1992; 1994; 1997a; 1997b) and Jenkins (cf. 1992a; 1992b; 2006a; 2006b) – fans are, as we have seen, subcultural agents exorporating the raw material provided by the industry for their own semiotic or appropriative purposes.

From a branding perspective, conversely, fans comprise particularly loyal consumers and potential buyers of labeled goods (cf. Meehan, 1991; Wasko, 1994; 2001a; Hills, 2002). To distinguish between these two approaches to fans, or supporters specifically, Guschwan (2012) separates ‘fandom’ from ‘brandom’.

The latter term is employed to “describe the pseudo-fan culture engineered by brand managers eager to cultivate consumer labor and loyalty while preempting the possibility of resistance that participatory fan culture promises” (Guschwan, 2012, p. 26).

Other researchers have also commented on the willingness of companies to energetically promote fan activity, and to benefit from fandom practices in general. As shown in the previous theory chapter, the internal markets that conglomerates create, along with the external markets that emerge through licensing deals with external parties, are saturated with repackaged and recycled products (Meehan, 2000). Fans, as explained by Eileen Meehan, constitute the ideal consumers for these products, as they, in her words, “can be counted on to purchase objects connected to the product line’s title regardless of the quality of any individual product” (2000, p. 83). This particular quality of fandom – the fans’ “unconditional” loyalty – encourages companies to try to turn the average consumer into a fan. As recognized by Jenkins too, companies operating within the contemporary entertainment industries actively seek to “provoke fan interactions” (2006b, p. 145), which in turn renders fandom something of a mainstream phenomenon (2007, p. 359f).
Jonathan Hardy (2011) found proof of this tendency also in his assessment of the *True Blood* television show as a commercial intertext. As his analyses showed, the HBO network, through corporate strategies such as the targeting of fan communities and buzz marketing, sought to “cultivate fan engagement” for the show (Hardy, 2011, p. 13). Apart from unauthorized fan activity, HBO produced online sites and promotions which served as spaces for immersive audience engagement. Similarly, and with reference to research on Norwegian media industries, Vilde Schanke Sundet and Espen Ytreberg (2009) claim that ‘activity’ and ‘being active’ are nowadays considered key audience attributes by media executives. As they argue, the concept of active is today used as a “strategic working notion” (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009, p. 383) for media companies.

### 5.3.2 A taxonomy of fan productivity

Pointing towards the increasingly ambivalent relationship between producers and consumers in the era of ‘prosumption’ is the notion of *affective labor* (Hardt & Negri, 2000). This term, along with concepts such as “free labor” (Terranova, 2000), has gained relevance in a culture where user-generating media technologies have proliferated and the work performed by non-professionals is beginning to receive genuine acknowledgement. As suggested by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the term can be applied to those forms of labor “which manipulate a feeling of ease, wellbeing, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (2000, p. 293). Indeed, the productivity performed by fans out of love for their object of fandom would stem from such inherently positive feelings.

But then, what kind of work is it that fans perform and in what ways may fan productivity actually benefit the industry? To date, the research literature recognizes at least three distinguishable, yet largely overlapping, ways, in which fans are drawn into commodification processes and thus potentially contribute to the creation of surplus value. This is in their roles as 1) ambitious *content creators* (cf. Terranova, 2000; Baym, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Martens, 2011), 2) providers of valuable *consumer data and information* (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; 2007; Deuze, 2007; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009) and 3) as vibrant *brand promoters* (cf. Jenkins, 2006a; Örnebring, 2007; Baym, 2009; Yang, 2009; Martens, 2011; Sandvoss, 2011).

Firstly then, and as pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, audience creativity in general and fan productivity in particular generate content that in various ways may be incorporated by the industry (Terranova, 2000; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Martens, 2011). Marianne Martens (2011), for example, has shown how the book publishing industry has grown increasingly aware of
the value of user-generated content. As she concludes from her research on publisher Harper’s multi-platform, transmedial book series *The Amanda Project*, the young fans to this series were encouraged “not only to be consumers, but also to be producers of content” (Martens, 2011, p. 60). The gaming industry in particular is known for involving fans in the production processes, perhaps not as content providers so much as sources for feedback and ideas (Deuze, 2007; Milner, 2009). For example, and as told by R. M. Milner (2009), in the development process of the *Fallout 3* game, fans labored as knowledge workers, providing the professional producers with information and interpretation. In a similar vein, Tolkien fans were frequently addressed by director Peter Jackson to give feedback on his ideas for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (Shefrin, 2004).

In addition, and relatedly, all active audiences – and especially when online – tend to provide the industry with large quantities of personal data which may be used in niche marketing campaigns (Andrejevic, 2004; 2005; 2007; 2009; van Dijck, 2009). The double role of the Internet user as both, and at the same time, a “content provider” and a “data provider” has been acknowledged by José van Dijck (2009, p. 47). As she explains, even though only a small percentage of users participate in the actual creation of content, every single one of them is a potential consumer. Therefore all Internet users – “whether active creators or passive spectators” (2009, p. 47) – constitute an attractive demographic to advertisers. When users participate in content production, they also, to a particularly high degree, contribute to the creation of metadata which can be exploited commercially (and, of course, politically). In line with this, Mark Andrejevic (2007) stresses how interactive spaces online constitute ‘digital enclosures’, available only to those who are willing to accept being monitored. Submitting to this surveillance means providing companies with different kinds of personal information “that has actual or speculative economic value” (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 297). Fans thus, along with other active users, perform “the work of being watched” (Andrejevic, 2004) and thereby, as noted by Vincent Mosco (1996), essentially contribute to the commodification process by helping companies decide what new products to produce and how these should be designed to succeed on the market.

Thirdly, fans and their creations are also exploited by the industry “as a public relation tool” (Harris, 1998, p. 5). Dealing with ARGs (Alternative Reality Games) as a symptom of both convergence culture and fan culture, Henrik Örnebring (2007) successfully illuminates this aspect of fan productivity. As he recognizes, these games are produced both by industry and by fans and both types potentially function as marketing vehicles for the industry: “Despite the
differences found between industry-produced and fan-produced ARGs, they still share a framework of consumption that conforms to corporate goals of marketing and brand building as well as fan audiences’ goals of pleasurable interaction with fictional worlds” (Örnebring 2007, p. 445). Thus, industry-produced and fan-produced contents, as argued by Örnebring, potentially “perform the same cultural function” (2007, p. 459). Similarly, in the context of music production, Nancy Baym (2009) has shown how fandom serves as a prolonged arm of the marketing departments by voluntarily promoting the bands and artists they care for, especially via the Internet. As she explains, this fan labor has been crucial to the uncontested success of Swedish music:

One reason for the international and domestic success of Swedish music is the work that its fans do online and off. Fans, most of whom live outside Sweden, are publicists, promoters, archivists, and curators, spreading this music far beyond the Swedish borders. They work for free, promoting bands and labels by highlighting their music on news sites, archives, blogs and offline by booking them (via the Internet) to play in local venues (2009, p. 434).

Through analyses of fan blogs and fan clubs online, Paul Théberge (2005) has similarly found that these paratexts ultimately become a form of promotional material as they showcase positive discourses about the particular object of fandom. Arguably then, enunciative fan productivity thus should not only be viewed as a platform of fan community and identity, but also as a potential source of buzz, helping companies to increase hype and visibility of a particular brand or product. As one marketing practitioner has stated: “Co-creating with your consumers not only disrupts your thinking but helps to create a buzz around your brand” (Needham, 2008, p. 61). In order to “create” such consumer talk online, companies are increasingly interested in so called viral marketing campaigns (Bryce, 2005; Kirby & Marsden, 2006).

Common to all these kinds of fan labor is that they are usually carried out without monetary compensation from the industry (Terranova, 2000; Baym, 2009; Martens, 2011). Thus, as stressed by Tiziana Terranova (2000), fan labor can be conceived of as free in two important respects: it is unwaged and it is volunteered. Yet, however much fan labor is “free” in these both of these respects, it is very restricted in another sense. In legal terms, the power of fans to rework or appropriate company properties is always curtailed. To no small extent, struggles seem to occur between industry and fans because of different understandings of ownership.
5.4 The issue of ownership: Where fans and industry collide

As the industry relies on labor of fans to produce and promote the value of its properties with increasing openness, it becomes increasingly difficult to hold in place the distinction between owners and consumers (Russo, 2009, p. 129).

In the context of fandom, the question of ownership needs to be understood in a wider perspective than purely legal terms. While no one can deny a brand owner’s authorized rights to a franchise, as expressed by copyright and intellectual property laws, fans too tend to develop a sense of ownership of their objects of fandom as these are excorporated from commercial culture. As acknowledged by Fiske, “The reverence, even adoration, fans feel for their object of fandom sits surprisingly easily with the contradictory feeling that they also ‘possess’ that object, it is their popular culture capital” (1992, p. 40). In a similar vein, Jenkins points out that, “In embracing popular culture texts, the fans claim those works are their own, remaking them in their own image, forcing them to respond to their needs and to gratify their desires” (2006b, p. 59). Thus, as recognized by Elana Shefrin, what is established between the industry and the fans is something of an imagined, shared ownership, since “participatory fandom is marked by a sustained emotional and physical engagement with a particular narrative universe – an engagement that visualizes a non-commercial, shared ownership with the media company that holds the commercial, legal property rights” (2004, p. 273). Or, as in the words of Jonathan Gray, the fans claim partial ownership (2010, p. 165) of their objects of fandom.

Conflicts occur between industry and fans when actual, legal ownership clashes with the fans’ sense of ownership. Both sides have ambitions, ideas and wishes regarding what the universe should look like and these are sometimes, yet far from always, identical. When discontent with the brand owner’s development of the franchise, fans might develop it in alternative directions through fan fiction, videos or other fan productions. Yet, even when the brand owner has an apologetic attitude towards fan creativity, legal rights do put constraints on what can and cannot be done. Thus, as Jenkins puts it: “While fans display a particularly strong attachment to popular narratives, act upon them in ways which make them their own property in some senses, they are also acutely and painfully aware that those fictions do not belong to them […]” (1992b, p. 24). Simone Murray and Alexis Weedon describe the dilemma in the following way:

Audiences are ever more incited to take advantage of highly interactive Web 2.0 technologies to demonstrate their attachment to existing brands via content creation, often in competition with other fans for corporate-ordained
prizes. Yet, at the same time, the inflating value of the content brand depends upon the integrity of the brand’s associations, maintained through strict regulation and prosecution of non-authorized uses. [...] [T]his tension puts existing intellectual property laws and technologically empowered creator-consumers on a collision course over ownership of the brand and its semiotic associations (2011, p. 5).

In history, many attempts – some successful, others less so – have been made by producers to try to “tame” fans and to restrict unwanted creativity. J.K Rowling’s attempt to tame the Harry Potter fandom is today well-known, as is Lucasfilm’s efforts to take charge of the Star Wars fandom (cf. Jenkins, 1992b; Shefrin, 2004). Rather than taking an appreciative approach to their fans, Lucasfilm treated them as rivals. Ultimately, this was a conflict battled within the Star Wars universe, yet as noted by Jenkins, these kinds of struggles are likely to occur within every franchise:

This conflict is one which has had to be actively fought or at least negotiated between fans and producers in almost every media fandom: it is one which threatens at any moment to disrupt the pleasure that fans find in creating and circulating their own texts based on someone else’s fictional “universe” [...] (1992b, p. 32).

As observed by, among others, Gray, one strategy undertaken by companies to cultivate sanctioned, controlled and monitored, fan-involvement is to create “policed playgrounds” (2010, p. 165) in which fans are allowed to play with a brand yet under certain rules and with sometimes significant limitations. The material created on these playgrounds can also, as Gray adds, become company property. Apart from this, companies may “filter” unacceptable content while privileging paratexts which run along with the firm’s interests (Gray, 2010, p. 165).

Thus, while professionals and amateurs build transmedial worlds together, investing both time and money in them, ownership is shared only in the mind’s eye. As conflicts such as those carried out within the Star Wars universe make evident, fans’ efforts to control “their” fictional world might be both ignored and combatted by the brand owners. And, as they also show, fans’ admiration and sympathy is often more directed at the texts themselves than at the professional producers (see also Sandvoss, 2011). Against this background, the following admission – made by one of the most consistent defenders of fan culture’s empowering potentials – is indeed an important one: “Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must contextualize our celebration of popular resistance” (Jenkins, 1992b, p. 27).
5.5 Concluding remarks

“Fandom is a profoundly liminal occupation, one that takes place neither within nor outside commercial culture, creative but also derivative, a celebration of consumerism as well as a maverick mode of consumption” (Gwenllian-Jones, 2003, p. 164). This statement by Sara Gwenllian-Jones is an apt summary of what I hope this chapter has made known. Fandom is a complex matter which we can never only understand in terms of “bad” or “good”. As Grossberg (1992) notes, the image of fans as either cultural dupes or as elite audiences are both embarrassingly over-simplified caricatures, a view shared by most audience researchers today, just as most researchers are likely to agree that fandom has both empowering and exploitative potentials. The chief struggle today, as yesterday, concerns which aspects of this complex “phenomenon” to emphasize. Should we highlight the powers practiced by the industry or those practiced by the audiences?

An equally important remark has been made by Matt Hills: “Prior work on fandom should not be seen as the end of one academic story arc, or as the beginning of another. As ever, we remain stuck in the middle […]” (2002, p. 183). It is easy of course to describe images of fans as if they came, went away and then never returned. In describing how the images of the fan changed from cultural dupe to productive rebel, I am probably guilty of presenting these images as if they could be neatly placed on a linear time line, one succeeding the other. This is not true, of course. While it is possible to trace some larger, paradigmatic shifts in scholarly perspectives on fandom, it is equally possible to find evidence of what could mistakenly be conceived of as “passé” images of fandom today. Indeed, in some contexts, fans are “still” being portrayed as passive dupes while in others they are “still” being romanticized as provocative and savvy rebels.

5.6 Summary of theoretical framework

The transmedial worlds to which these fans are often devoted are as complex phenomena as fandom is itself. This final theory chapter, along with the two previous ones, has only scratched the surface of all knowledge that has developed on these issues over years of multidisciplinary research. Important aspects have by necessity been left out in order to give room to those which are to inform my forthcoming analyses of the Transformers brand. My focus has been on the efforts undertaken by both professional producers and fans to build entertainment brands that are exiting, immersive and lucrative, and to understand these worlds from both a cultural and an economic perspective. As shown in
Chapter 3, transmedial entertainment forms a web of inter- and paratextual components, each with potential to generate money by being sold as a ready commodity and to function as promotion for all other commodities. Professionals, as Chapter 4 argues, invest in this kind of entertainment properties as a way to reduce risk. Synergistic transmedial franchises contain financially safe entertainment: they are (often) built upon pre-sold properties; involve a multitude of revenue streams; are cared for by a range of companies; are inevitably self-promotional; and create loyal consumers. Thus, transmedial entertainment makes economic sense.

But, transmedial entertainment is potentially also a particularly thrilling kind of entertainment, capable of offering rich mediated experiences to engaged audiences. Therefore, as shown on the present chapter, they usually have big fan bases that collectively invest significant amounts of time, money and labor into these fictional worlds. Fan engagement takes various expressions, yet tends to foster dialogue with other fans as well as with the industry. This dialogue is not always marked by consensus however. Due to clashing interests, conflicts occasionally surface – within the fan community, and between fans and professionals. Indeed, while both fans and industry care for these brands, they ultimately do it for different reasons. Professionals create these texts and paratexts for money; fans often pay money to create them. Professionals produce the commodities which they think will generate the most profit; fans produce those texts which can fill in the “gaps” in the commercial texts. Official texts are formed to reduce risk, increase streamability and create synergy; unofficial textual components are produced to deepen personal and collective experience. Together, the efforts undertaken by both parties produce a tangled, yet not random, web of official and unofficial texts and paratexts, which in turn contribute to the visibility of these transmedial brands. By employing the same narrative elements, the same set of characters and the same set of symbolic expressions as foundations of their respective world-buildings, the promotional capacity of these universes are continuously enhanced by both industry and audiences.

In coherence with my previous theory chapters, the present provides the tools necessary to understand how worlds like Transformers are jointly created and controlled by companies and consumers. These worlds are invested with value and expanded not only through marketing and branding strategies deployed by the industry, but also through various forms of fan productivity. Knowledge of such practices in terms of semiotic, enunciative, and textual fan productivity has been indispensable to my analyses. In addition to this, the no-
tion of *fan labor* has significantly influenced my interpretations of what these forms of fan productivity can be taken to mean in terms of not only *pleasure* and *resistance* but also *exploitation*. In the following chapter on method and methodology, further details on how my complete theoretical framework has been brought into my analyses of the transmedial world of *Transformers* will be presented.
6 Methodological approach

My methodological approach is informed by the contextualization and theoretical framework presented in the preceding chapters in regard to how transmedial entertainment worlds are produced, consumed and textually organized. My approach to the Transformers brand world, thus, has not been ‘inductive’ in the sense that theory has been brought into play after data generation and analysis (as in ‘grounded theory’, see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Indeed, previous theory has played a great role in the development of my interest in the subject in the first place. Neither has it been completely ‘deductive’, if by this term we refer to research that takes as its point of departure clearly formulated and theoretically anchored hypotheses against which the data are tested. Rather, my approach can best be understood as abductive, meaning that theory, data generation and data analysis has been “developed simultaneously in a dialectical process” (Mason, 2002, p. 180). This process, in turn, corresponds to the idea about the ‘hermeneutic circle’, which recognizes the necessity of “moving back and forth” between ‘the whole’ and the individual ‘parts’ in order to understand any text fully (Kjørup & Torhell, 1999). Essentially, my analyses of the Transformers world has demanded a constant mind shift, not only between theory and primary material but also between different layers of the material – from micro to macro levels, not least.

I have also argued that phenomena like transmedial worlds of entertainment lend themselves to full-circuit studies, meaning that – especially in the ‘era of media convergence’ – we should look at how these worlds are being produced and consumed as well as how they are constituted as texts. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the methodologies and methods which underlie this thesis. It begins with a section on methodology, in which I explain the qualitative approach chosen for my study. Then, I describe the case study approach and motivate my decision to perform a multi-method investigation of my object of study, followed by a shift to the specific data sources which have been employed in my study, and the ways in which these have been selected and approached to generate data. In relation to this, ethical considerations of relevance to my research process are accounted for. The chapter ends with a self-reflective discussion on the strengths and shortcomings of the methodological choices that have been made within the frames of this thesis. This last point will return us to the important question of validity.
6.1 Methodologies: Qualitative research, interpretation and ways of understanding reality

My thesis rests exclusively upon qualitative analyses (Alasuutari, 1995; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Seale, 1998; 2004; Bryman & Burgess, 1999; Silverman, 2001; Berg, 2001; Mason, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Already this information offers essential clues about some of the assumptions and convictions, or methodologies, by which I have approached my object of study. To begin with, it reveals a firm belief that knowledge about this can be obtained through unquantifiable data (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 7). Although qualitative research can include quantitative data, words – spoken or written – are generally of far greater importance than numbers (Seale, 1998, p. 17). Moreover, my involvement with qualitative analyses suggests that my role as a researcher is to make informed interpretations of rich and nuanced bodies of data. As noted by Jennifer Mason, qualitative research is rooted in “a philosophical position which is broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted” (2002, p. 3). This emphasis on interpretation, in turn, implies that the researcher must take on a particularly active role in making sense of the empirical material, and be careful to avoid making under-interpretations as well as over-interpretations of the data – a challenge that most analysts would find difficult (Arvidsson, 2000; Jansson, 2002, p. 162). Researchers, as André Jansson has pointed out, are usually confronted with one out of two types of criticisms: either they are accused of making conclusions which are “too close to the data itself”, or they are criticized for making conclusions which are “too wide-ranging or abstract – not sufficiently anchored in the data” (2002, p. 162).

Ultimately then, my decision to approach Transformers qualitatively comes with some pre-existing understandings of social reality and of our capabilities to gain knowledge from and about this reality. Fundamentally, qualitative approaches accommodate a trust in people and their “remnants” – including texts, oral statements and artifacts – as important sources of data, and this conviction, as my later presentation of my methods will make clear, has guided my entire research design. However, while this assumption can perhaps be regarded as the lowest common denominator for scholars involved with this kind of research, it must be remembered that ‘qualitative research’ is an umbrella term for a huge variety of methodologies (Mason, 2002). This, in turn, means that qualitative research actually accommodates different, and not always entirely compatible, ontologies and epistemologies; that is, various ways of looking at the world as well as multiple ideas about the kind of knowledge that we can obtain about
this world. In short, my case-based approach to my object of study is syncretic as it relies on different methodologies and methods, including those connected to ethnography, semiotics, and discourse analysis.

While I hesitate to align myself with the kind of relativistic, postmodernist thinking that claims that there is no such thing as a material, independent reality what so ever, I do believe that when working with any kind of research data it is vital to remember that our knowledge about this world is always a construction. This is also why I, throughout this chapter, choose the term data generation over “data collection”. This is inspired by Mason who prefers the former term “precisely because most qualitative perspectives would reject the idea that a researcher can be a completely neutral collector of information about the social world” (2002, p. 52).

6.2 The case study approach

The case study approach has proved particularly fruitful for understanding complex, present-day phenomena (Merriam, 1994; Berg, 2001; Yin, 2009). The Transformers brand world constitutes my ‘case’ in this thesis, and the ‘phenomenon’ that I seek to investigate by help of this case is worlds of transmedial entertainment, cherished and expanded by media companies as well as by fans. My choice of case has primarily been prompted by the theoretical focus of this thesis. The nature of this brand world has thus played a central role when selecting my case. My research purpose and questions, along with previously announced delimitations, indicate what particular aspects of this case that are central to my study. At a general level, Yin holds that “the prior development of theoretical propositions” is beneficial to case studies, as it helps guide data generation and analysis (2009, p. 18). Again, the abductive strategy characterizes my working process, in that theory and analysis have mutually informed each other. My point of departure has been in theoretical concepts and perspectives, although rather than working with “theoretical propositions”, my guidance have been my theoretically motivated research purpose and attached research questions.

As emphasized in my introductory chapter, the Transformers world is far from unique in character as today’s entertainment culture is filled with similar franchises. Without neglecting the differences that do exist between different franchises and their fan bases, I imagine that similar findings to those presented in this thesis would have surfaced if I had chosen to do my study on contemporary versions of, for example, the SpiderMan, Batman or Turtles brand worlds. However, my choice of case has also been informed by factors related to practical matters; most notably the availability of relevant data at a specific period of
time during my research process. The establishment of the 2007 Transformers franchise timed aptly with my data generating procedure and thus provided me with the chance to observe my case as it developed in “real time”. Indeed, the temporal aspect is an important factor in all case studies. As explained by Robert K. Jin, a case study can be described as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (2009, p. 18, my emphasis).

Moreover, case studies are particularly suitable for answering how- and why-questions (Yin, 2009). One focus in this thesis is on ‘how’ the Transformers brand world is constituted, and especially in regard to the relationship between the official and the unofficial versions of this world, and in the continuation of this, the producer-consumer relationship. The explorative approach that goes with the how-questions is particularly useful when, for example, little is known about the phenomenon under investigation, and tends to encourage qualitative rather than quantitative procedures (Arvidsson, 2000). My own research questions do not seek for causality in the sense that explicit explanatory studies do. This does not mean that questions of ‘why’ are completely absent from my work, because I also seek some of the underlying mechanisms, incentives or motives which may help us understand why these brand worlds are constructed as they are.

Most importantly, what the case study approach affords is the investigation of a phenomenon from more than one angle. Essentially, the case study approach constitutes a “bricolage” of methods. According to Bruce L. Berg’s definition, “The case study is not actually a data-gathering technique, but a methodological approach that incorporates a number of data-generating measures” (2001, p. 225, my emphasis). In the words of Bill Gillham, similarly: “Case study is a main method. Within it different sub-methods are used: interviews, observations, document and record analysis, work samples, and so on” (2000, p. 13, my emphasis). All of the different “data-generating measures” or “sub-methods”, then, can be thought of as windows or points-of-entry into the researched phenomenon. The “ability to deal with a full variety of evidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 11) has been stressed as one of the case study’s greatest strengths. Indeed, those in favor of triangulation would welcome the case study approach, and for me it corresponds well with my ambition of approaching Transformers in a full-circuit manner.

### 6.2.1 Further motivation for a multi-method approach

While my ambition to do a full-circuit study has been the primary factor in my choice to conduct a multi-method case study, the decision has also been in-
formed by other circumstances which need to be accounted for. To begin with, my choice of method is partly a consequence of inaccessibility. The Transformers franchise exists within the entertainment industry and as others have experienced before me, gaining access to company board rooms, especially within this industry sector, is not always an easy procedure (cf. Ryan, 1992; Wikström, 2006; Doyle & Frith, 2006, p. 562). To the extent that I was unsuccessful in my attempts to speak to professionals involved with the Transformers brand personally, I have found it fruitful to make use of “alternative pathways” such as journalistic articles, corporate press releases, annual reports, and corporate websites. Thus, beyond my strong conviction of the benefits of approaching my case from different angles, my utilization of multiple sources of data has also partly sprung out of necessity.

On a different note, the case study methodology usually entails an observation-al approach to the phenomenon under investigation, and this circumstance too tends to expand the number of data sources used. As pointed out by Yin, the case study researcher inevitably becomes a sort of “detective” (2009, p. 72), on constantly guard against anything that somehow relates to the case in question. In my case, my acquaintance with the Transformers transmedial world – about which I had only little prior knowledge – has grown progressively. Apart from following the happenings around the 2007 film in real time and observing what went on within the frames of the overall marketing campaign, I also accumulated knowledge through numerous press articles, web searches, company websites, DVD extra material, business papers, entertainment websites, fan wikis, fan communities, YouTube videos, etc. Naturally, these kinds of data sources grew in importance as time passed and I needed to look back at the 2007 events retrospectively. It goes without saying that an encompassing transmedial world like Transformers is hard to get a grip on only by looking at what happens “right now, right here”. With numerous campaigns running in parallel and a bulk of marketing initiatives carried out in various places within a limited period of time, I have certainly needed to find information about relevant events and processes by reading backwards also.

6.3 Data sources, selection and sampling

In broad terms, two main categories of data sources have been utilized in this thesis: texts and agents. Texts of different types have played a central role in this study, as indicated above. However, the various texts employed have by necessity been given different treatment as they have been employed for different purposes. In order to create some kind of overriding order within the rich body
of texts upon which my work is based, it is useful to make an initial distinction between texts which have been approached as sources of information and texts which have been approached as objects of study (Østbye, Knapskog, Helland, & Larsen, 2004, p. 53). In the former case, focus is on something beyond the text; in the latter, we want to know something about the text per se. As sources of information about my object of study, the Transformers brand world, the following texts have been found particularly useful:

- Journalistic texts (including non-written)
- Corporate strategic documents
- Corporate websites
- Marketing material
- Fan websites
- Documentaries
- Wikis or other databases

From the rich body of texts available on the Transformers brand world – exemplified in the above list – some have been selected for deeper analysis. In other words, certain texts found within the categories presented in this list have been approached not “only” as sources of information, but also as objects of study “in their own right”.

The second major source of data is here headed agents. This heading refers to individuals who in one way or the other are actively engaged with my object of study, including both professionals working within the entertainment industry and members of the Transformers fandom. Thus, added to the above list of used data sources should be the following two:

- Professional producers
- Fans

As will soon be explained more carefully, two primary methods have been used to generate data from these sources: text analysis and interviews. The section below will provide a more detailed account for the most significant sources of data included in this study, beginning with the texts and continuing with the agents. In a later section, I will specify the methods by which data have been generated from these sources and the challenges and opportunities they presented.
6.3.1 Texts

The media texts are obviously a meeting point in order to understand the intersection between media production and consumption (Hagen & Wasko, 2000, p. 19).

While quantitative research aims at empirical representation, qualitative research is commonly characterized by *strategic sampling*. Mason describes qualitative sampling as an *organic* practice as it, often, is something that develops throughout the research process (2002, p. 127). Indeed, the notion fits well with my own research process during which decisions related to selection of specific data sources and sampling logics, to a large extent, have been taken progressively as my understanding for my object of study has increased. Since my sampling procedure has also been heavily guided by my research purpose and theoretical framework, it can also be described as *theoretical sampling* (cf. Mason, 2002, p. 124). However, as also acknowledged by Mason (2002) – and as touched upon earlier in this chapter – within qualitative research, sampling and selection decisions are often made with respect to practical issues, such as availability and access to relevant types of data or data sources.

Ultimately, my selection of texts as objects of study has been motivated by my full-circuit research design. As my ambition has been to approach *Transformers* as both culture and economy, I have searched for texts which, along with my interviews with individual agents, have been deemed suitable for generating insights into both of these perspectives. As a result, important parts of my data have been generated from texts which origin both from the “official”, corporate version of the *Transformers* brand world, and from the “unofficial”, consumer-made ditto. My focus, as mentioned initially, rests upon the specific brand environment that was created with the arrival of the 2007 film: what I refer to as the 2007 “movie verse” in this thesis.

The overall film marketing campaign

As a first necessary step to gain an overview of my object of study, I have needed to create sort of a “map” of it. Most importantly, given my focus on the 2007 “movie verse”, this mapping was aimed at providing me with an overview of the overall film marketing campaign that was launched to prepare grounds for the new *Transformers* film. In my subsequent results chapters, I also refer to this promotional environment as the *Transformers* ‘intertextual matrix’ (see Marshall, 2002, p. 69). Such a mapping has forced me to get acquainted with a range of commodities and paratexts which share a lowest common denomina-
tor: the Transformers logotype. The 2007 film has naturally been my starting point; yet a bulk of related commodities and, not least, marketing initiatives carried out in relation to this film have ended up on my map, including, for example, promotional websites with all of their diverse contents, promotional videos, in-store advertising, contests, games, etc.

As a next step in my research on the official Transformers world, I have asked questions related to the appearance of the movie verse and the film marketing campaign especially. Primarily, and consistent with my research questions, I have sought to understand how, and the extents to which, the marketing opened up for any type of consumer engagement. For this purpose, I have on the one hand sought to understand the film marketing campaign “from a bird’s perspective”; that is, as a whole, comprising of a rather diffuse mass of intertextually connected promotional texts. This part of my study has allowed me, with the help of my theoretical framework, to bring some kind of order into this maze by crystallizing central themes that can be said to unite unique marketing efforts. To achieve this, I have on the other hand needed to go into deeper analyses of specific marketing efforts. Basically, in order to understand an advertising campaign on an intertextual level, it also needs to be approached on a textual level.

Although my ambition has been to make as a complete account as possible of this campaign, I have needed to be selective in my sampling and to account for elements within this campaign which have been judged relevant in relation to my research purpose and questions. As a consequence, marketing elements which have been taken to hold valuable clues about the producer-consumer relationship have been prioritized in my actual account of the campaign. My sampling process in relation to the overall film marketing campaign began already during its running; yet as indicated also earlier, retrospective outlooks have been necessary. In coherence with the abductive character of my research in general, data generation in relation to the campaign has been an ongoing procedure throughout my research process. Written descriptions of relevant marketing efforts along with video recordings and screen shots of the same have assisted me in my analyses of the campaign.

Specific marketing initiatives

More than any other ingredient within the overall marketing campaign for the 2007 Transformers film, one particular “sub-campaign” has been the subject of deeper analysis. This is what I refer to as The Sector Seven Experience – a viral marketing campaign that ran over a range of media- and content platforms. The
The campaign was based on a website called SectorSeven.org, but successively incorporated a range of other promotional texts, all adding different aspects to an essentially transmedial story. In my analysis of this marketing initiative, the main campaign website (which, as of October 20, 2012, still could be accessed by help of the password ‘deceptibot’) is my point of departure. However, as this was part of a transmedial experience that developed across platforms, I extended my analysis to cover these platforms as well.

Special attention is paid to the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign because of my theoretical focus. As in my analysis of the overall film marketing campaign, questions have been asked concerning how, and the extents to which, this particular marketing initiative encouraged any type of consumer engagement. I also searched for themes in the specific contents delivered within the frames of this sub-campaign. The campaign started with the launch of a so called ‘teaser trailer’ on December 22, 2006 and, like the film campaign at large, I followed it both in real time and through retrospective outlooks. Also here, written descriptions, video recordings and screen shots have been helpful in my analytical process.

**Corporate documents**

Apart from actual marketing texts, various kinds of corporate, strategic documents have constituted valuable assets in my study. Press releases, corporate websites, annual reports, and campaign plans (for the Nordic region) have increased my knowledge on the Transformers brand and my understanding of it as a corporate property. Out of these various strategic texts, Hasbro’s annual reports, from 1997 to 2010, have been made subject to a more thorough analysis in this thesis. Ultimately, what these documents have provided is an understanding of the Transformers franchise in general and the 2007 movie verse in particular in the light of Hasbro’s overall branding ideas. Most importantly, my analysis of the reports has offered me clues regarding Hasbro’s wished-for relationship with their consumers. The annual reports were all accessed via the company’s external website. The analyzed reports comprise the entire selection that could be accessed online in time for my analysis, which implies that my sampling here was effected by practical matters. However, while it might have been possible to get access to reports earlier than 1997, the selection of reports available on Hasbro’s website essentially covered the relevant time-period for this thesis. As the subsequent chapter will show, it was decisions taken around the millennium that largely paved the way for the 2007 Transformers movie verse to emerge.
In this thesis, two professionally produced texts have been analyzed to add to my understanding of the producers’ images of the fans, which in turn provide information about the relationship between the two groups of agents. The texts analyzed for this purpose are film director Michael Bay’s blog and a “behind-the-scenes” documentary included on the 2007 Transformers DVD (see below). The director Michael Bay used his personal blog as a means of promoting the 2007 Transformers film. Apart from providing news updates on the filmmaking process and links to articles featuring interviews with the director, the blog also notified fans on releases of new promotional material, such as TV-spots, trailer-videos, printed advertisements, contests, co-branding campaigns, etc. In keeping with the standard blog format, the blog employed a personal approach vis-à-vis the readers. Many of the news posts were signed by the director himself, whereas others (not included in my analysis) were signed by the blog administrator ‘Nelson’. The news posts analyzed in this thesis are all somehow related to the release of the new Transformers film, indicating that they were mainly published during years 2006 and 2007.

The Transformers DVD

The DVD documentary researched for the same purpose as Michael Bay’s blog consisted of three sections (‘Our World’, ‘Their War’ and ‘More Than Meets the Eye’) which, among other things, featured interviews with members of the cast and the crew. Among the professionals featured on the DVD are Hasbro’s CEO Brian Goldner, director of boys design Aaron Archer, marketing director Greg Lombardo, film director Michael Bay, film executive producer Steven Spielberg, producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura, and script writers Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci. The selection of the documentary for analysis, as well as director Michael Bay’s professional blog, was primarily done with consideration to the fact that both of these texts contain first-hand statements from producers involved with the building and promotion of the contemporary Transformers brand world.

Fan forum: TFW2005

To gain insights into the unofficial Transformers world – the one primarily built and extended by fans – my research also involves analyses of fan-made texts. Partly to account for some of the enunciative productivity that took place within the context of the 2007 movie verse, and partly to understand the relation between official and unofficial paratexts as well as between producers and fans
within the same franchise, I have researched two specific strands of “fan talk”. The first of these was carried out in relation the first trailer video that was made in support of the 2007 Transformers film, and that was released a year before the film premiered (the video was made available on June 29, 2006). The data were generated from the forum fraction of online fan community TFW2005.com, which claims to be “the largest fan community related to Transformers toys”. The second strand of fan talk was spurred by the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign (see below).

The selection of the TFW2005 forum was especially made with consideration to the community’s recognized establishment within the Transformers fandom, and to its members’ obvious interest in the video. While the toys might still be at the center of attention on this online community, its forum covers most areas of the franchise. If the sampling done in relation to the overall film marketing campaign and the ‘Sector Seven’ promotion was more of an ongoing process, the sampling of fan talk data is more easily defined temporally. The data generated from TFW2005.com was found under the overarching forum heading “Transformers Movie Discussion”, and the dates of the posts extend between May 15, 2006 and July 14, 2006. The qualitative approach of this thesis guided my selection of posts, which means that posts which were deemed to have contributed little to the fulfilling of my research purpose were excluded from my analysis. The posts analyzed were all picked from threads whose heading somehow pointed to the announcement video – before and after the video’s release.12 The data were generated between October 17 and October 18, 2011.

Fan blog: Transformers live action movie blog

The second strand of fan talk was carried out in the context of a fan-run blog called Transformers Live Action Movie Blog (accessible via URL, http://transformerslive.blogspot.se/). Apart from providing me with additional insights into some of the enunciative productivity that took place in relation to the 2007 Transformers film, this blog allowed me to follow the previously presented ‘Sector Seven’ campaign into the fandom terrain and thereby expand my

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12 The threads included in my analysis were the following: 1) “Transformers Movie Teaser, Poster Out July 4th…” (started on May 15, 2006), 2) “Rumor: Teaser Information?” (started on June 18, 2006), 3) “Teaser online NOW! DO NOT POST – admin”, 4) “Teaser Description?? [SPOILERS]” (started June 26, 2006), 5) “Teaser Trailer on official site” (started on June 29, 2006), 6) “Transformers Teaser Officially Launched” (started on June 29, 2006), 7) “Just saw Pirates with the trailer” (started on July 7, 2006) and 8) “Why do you hate the movie?” (started on June 30, 2006). While it must be considered likely that the announcement video appeared in later forum conversations also, these threads can be regarded as the most central ones. This is primarily because these threads had the video as their main topic or starting point for discussion, and because they were created close in time (before and after) to the video’s release.
knowledge on the relationship between official and unofficial elements within the film marketing campaign in particular and the Transformers brand world in general. News posts and commentaries related to this viral marketing campaign have been analyzed for these purposes.

My selection of the fan blog Transformers Live Action Movie Blog as a source of data followed the same rationale as did my choice to include the TFW2005 forum in my analysis, albeit a manifest interest in the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign was also determinative. The news posts sampled from the Transformers Live Action Movie Blog were published between December 22, 2006 (the date when the campaign started) and July 2, 2007. This sample is the result of a search on the blog for posts including a mentioning of the phrase ‘sector seven’. Commentaries to these news posts have been added even after the film’s premiere (on July 4, 2007). Yet, in my analysis I have stayed focused on those written prior to this event. This is mainly because the campaign’s main website was really only updated until this specific point in time. The data for this analysis were generated between November 8 and November 9, 2011.

Fan videos

To account also for some of the textual fan productivity that took place within the context of the 2007 Transformers film, I made analyses of one specific type of text: fan-made trailer videos. In this thesis, two fan-made trailer videos, which appeared around the time of the release of the 2007 film’s theatrical debut, have been analyzed. By comparing these videos with the officially produced versions (see below), I have allowed myself to add new aspects to my discussion on the relationship between producers and the official version of Transformers, on the one hand, and the fans and the unofficial version of Transformers on the other. While both videos can be found elsewhere on the web, my access to the videos has been through video sharing website YouTube, which means that the commentaries and other contextualizing data also derive primarily from this website.

To allow comparisons with the official promotional videos, my selection of the two fan-made videos was made with respect to the following five criteria:

1. **Title**: the word “teaser” or “trailer” should be included in the video’s title.
2. **Contents**: the video’s content should be connected to the 2007 film somehow.

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14 In relation to fan-made video no. 1, 263 commentaries had been offered in time for my analysis, which was mainly carried out during fall 2011. The same figure for fan-made video no. 2 is 68.
3. **Time of release**: the video should have been released close in time to the theatrical debut of the film (before, during, or closely after).

4. **Technological quality**: the video should be “viewable”, meaning that it needs to have at least decent resolution and sound.

5. **Existence of commentaries**: the video should have attracted at least a few commentaries which can be used to contextualize the text.

Important to note is that I in no way claim these selected videos to be representative of the entire bulk of fan-made *Transformers* trailer videos available on YouTube or in other areas of the world wide web. Rather, the videos should be regarded as illustrative examples of what videos of this kind may look like.

**Official promotional videos**

As made evident above, my research also includes an analysis of some of the promotional videos which were launched to increase consumer awareness of the 2007 *Transformers* film. The videos which have been analyzed in this thesis are three trailer videos (the so called ‘announcement’ trailer, released on June 29, 2006; the ‘teaser’ trailer, released on December 20, 2006; and the full-length trailer, released on May 17, 2007), and two TV-commercials (‘Hidden’ and ‘Vibrations’). One key motive of this analysis – other than providing me with insights into the overall film marketing campaign on a textual level – was to generate data which would allow me to draw comparisons between the corporate versions of trailer videos and the fan-made dittos. However, only the fan-made videos receive full coverage in this thesis for reasons of space.

6.3.2 **Agents**

As declared earlier, agents constitute my second primary source of data in this study. These comprise two main categories of informants: professionals involved with the production, marketing and/or licensing of *Transformers*, and consumers, or more specifically, fans of the same brand. Naturally, this categorization is coupled with considerable respect for the increasingly obvious situation that in reality – as argued throughout this thesis – these two categories are far from fixed. Again, we all move in and out of our roles as ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’, and this, of course, also applies to my informants.

**Professional producers**

Contacts with professionals at some of the firms involved proved helpful in getting an overview of the marketing machinery that was spurred by the arrival of the 2007 *Transformers* film. The same people enriched my understanding of
some of the ideas, incentives, and aspirations that formed the *Transformers* brand world over time and in relation to the 2007 movie verse especially. A total of six interviews were conducted with five professional producers. The following list is an overview of my interviews with the professional producers:

- **United International Pictures (UIP):** Mats Jegéus (Marketing Manager, Stockholm)
  - Telephone interview 1: December 3, 2007
  - Telephone interview 2 (follow-up): June 26, 2008
- **Hasbro Nordic:** Hans-Christian Ulrich (Marketing Manager, Copenhagen)
  - Telephone interview 1: January 24, 2008
- **Kidz Entertainment:** Karola Hesselberg-Thomsen (Sr Brand Manager, Copenhagen)¹⁴
  - Telephone interview 1: April 21, 2008
- **Activision Blizzard Nordic AB:** Anders Wistam (Sales Manager, Stockholm)
  - Telephone interview 1: June 19, 2008
- **Comic book writer/author Simon Furman** (Author/Writer)
  - Face-to-face interview 1: June 20, 2010

My selection of agents was partly affected by practical matters, such as availability and access. In terms of the professional perspective, unfruitful attempts were made to do interviews with representatives of the U.S. divisions of Hasbro and Paramount Pictures. However, since *United International Pictures (UIP)* was the company in charge of the international marketing of the 2007 *Transformers* film, I decided to contact them initially. UIP’s Nordic office is located in Stockholm, and on November 22, 2007, I got into contact with marketing manager Mats Jegéus. He volunteered for two telephone interviews, the first of which was conducted on December 3, 2007 and the second on June 26, 2008.

Through my interview with Mats Jegéus at UIP, I received contact information to Hans-Christian Ulrich at Hasbro Nordic in Copenhagen, who was responsible for the Nordic marketing of *Transformers*. A telephone interview with him was conducted on January 24, 2008. Besides this interview, we established an email contact through which I gratefully got hold of the *Transformers* marketing plan for Scandinavia and photos of in-store advertisements. It was also Mats Jegéus at UIP who informed me of Kidz Entertainment in Copenhagen, the company involved with the licensing deals concerning the *Transformers* brand. He provided contact information to the company’s senior brand manager at

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¹⁴ Since my interviews, the company has changed its name to INK, and Karola Hesselberg-Thomsen is today Business Manager.
that point in time, Karola Hesselberg-Thomsen. A telephone interview with her was conducted on April 21, 2008.

Representing the three companies, which were most involved with the *Transformers* brand at the time of the arrival of the 2007 film, my contacts at UIP, Hasbro Nordic and Kidz Entertainment provided valuable insights into some of the strategic thinking and decision-making that underpinned the marketing of the film. In order to increase my understanding of the marketing process further, I decided also to contact one of the most important licensees of the *Transformers* brand, Activision. This is the company that was behind the film tie-in game, and on June 19, 2008, I conducted a telephone interview with Anders Wistam, at that time sales manager at *Activision Blizzard Nordic AB* in Stockholm.

Within the context of the 2010 NordCon fan convention, which I attended with the purpose of interviewing *Transformers* fans (see below), I also got the opportunity to conduct a face-to-face interview with one of the most well-known *Transformers* writers, Simon Furman. Over the years, Furman has written *Transformers* comic book stories for, amongst others, Marvel Comics (US. and UK.), Dreamwave, and most recently IDW Publishing (Furman, 2012). By interviewing one of the most influential writers of the *Transformers* fiction, I gained helpful insights into the narrative development of the franchise, an aspect which (as will be further evidenced in the following chapters) is of relevance to this thesis also.

**Fans**

The second category of agents interviewed for the purpose of my study, the fans, included attendees to a fan convention called NordCon. This convention was arranged by Nordic online community NTFA.net (Nordic Trans Fans Association) and took place on June 19-20, 2010, in Aalborg, Denmark. The primary purpose of these interviews was to gain insights into fan experiences of and perspectives on the *Transformers* world and related matters, and for reasons that will be theoretically argued below, I decided to generate my data from focus group interviews. A total of three focus group interviews were conducted during the two-day convention. The following group constellations, consisting of a total of nine people, were formed:

- **Focus group 1**, June 19, 2010, 4 participants (held in English)
- **Focus group 2**, June 20, 2010, 3 participants (held in Swedish)
- **Focus group 3**, June 20, 2010, 2 participants (held in Swedish)
In addition to my focus group interviews with NordCon participants, I have also conducted separate interviews with two of the administrators of the NTFA (Nordic Trans Fans Association) community – the Nordic Transformers community that organized the convention. Both of these interviews were conducted before the convention and should be regarded as mainly preparatory. One of the interviews was by telephone, lasting over 60 minutes. This interview was conducted and recorded on March 4, 2008. The second interview was (on my informant’s request) conducted as an e-mail interview. My interview questions were emailed on March 9, 2008, and answers returned on March 10, 2008.

The NordCon convention, which over the years has developed into a regular event, constituted at the time of my interviews the only one of its kind in the Nordic region. In preparing for my convention participation and interviews with fans specifically, I was in contact with the administrators of the forum, to whom I also explained my intentions as a researcher. On June 3, 2010, two weeks prior to the convention and with the help of the administrators, I published a notice on the discussion forum of NTFA, in which I announced my participation in the event and my interest in conducting interviews with convention attendees. The notice also contained a brief explanation of my research aim and background, a note on the participants’ rights to anonymity, and a call for interested persons to contact me personally via e-mail. Despite reminders, my call on the fan forum did not result in more than two volunteers, which is why I also had to attract people to my interviews at the convention itself. Soon after the convention had been officially opened, I took the opportunity to announce my participation purposes once more to the 22 attendees and asked for interested attendees to approach me. Due to the small number of participants, those interested would have had no troubles finding me, especially since I also wore a name tag. To the extent that I judged it necessary, I also approached attendees and invited them to partake in my interviews.

All interviews conducted within the frames of my study have been recorded and transcribed. All telephone interviews were recorded via a telephone recording-device, whereas the focus group interviews with convention attendees were recorded both by a dictaphone (placed on the table) and a video camera (placed as to get a full-shoot of all participants).

6.4 Methods for generating data

Data generation involves both analytical and interpretive processes and is achieved through the employment of specific methods (Mason, 2002). With respect to the aims of this thesis, text analysis and interviews have been judged
the most suitable ways to generate data from the sources presented above. In this section, my use of these methods is accounted for. The data generation process also involves the organization of data, which is needed for the purpose of analysis. Important to note, as Mason points out, is that while this organization typically means that “you are using the same lens to explore patterns and themes which occur across your data”, the case study approach is among those study forms which “involve ways of seeing and sorting your data which do not necessarily use the same lens across the whole in this way” (2002, p. 165). This recognition holds true of my study also, since, chiefly, I have had to develop different coding schedules for my different types of data. It is my belief that the account below of my methods provides valuable information about my ways of approaching and making sense of my data. However, to account for some key principles which have guided my coding and analyzing procedures, this section ends with a separate section on this.

6.4.1 Text analyses

The uses we intend to make of a text have implications for the kind of text analyses we might want to conduct. In particular, it determines how “deep” into the text we want to “dive”. When used as a source of information about something outside of the text, it might be enough to take the text’s content into account without the ambition of finding themes, discourses, genres, implied readers, etc. Conversely, when the text is approached as an object of study in its own right, there is generally a wish to disseminate the text more thoroughly and to re-construct it with the help of, for example, invented themes or categories. Depending on our choice of approach, we are also met with different challenges. The first type of text analysis tests the researcher’s ability to develop source criticism, while the second tests the researcher’s ability to re-build a text once it has been “torn apart” and to make manifest new meanings (Østbye, et al., 2004).

Like qualitative research in general then, there are many versions of qualitative text analysis. Semiotics (cf. Eco, 1997; Barthes, 1986; Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1986), (critical) discourse analysis (cf. Fairclough, 1992; 1995; Potter, 1996; van Dijk, 1997; Tirsch, Meyer, Wodak, & Wetter, 2000; Winther Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002), conversation analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992), and narratology (Propp, 1968) represent some of the most common approaches. Out of the rich variety of existent approaches, my own text analyses are mainly informed by semiotics and discourse analysis. Essentially, both semiotics and discourse analysis allow for symptomatic readings in that they approach texts as manifestations of underlying meanings or patterns, which the producer may not
be aware of (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 17; Østbye, et al., 2004). Although not the only purpose of my text analyses, they were partly aimed at making manifest such “hidden” significances, especially in regard to the producer-fan relationship.

**Inspiration from semiotics**

Semiotics, or “the science of signs”, is fundamentally concerned with “how meaning is created and conveyed in texts” (Berger, 1998, p. 13), and its value as a way to understand popular culture texts has been demonstrated over and over within our field. In broad terms, what semiotics has contributed to my study is attentiveness to textual elements which may have significance to how the Transformers texts comprising the 2007 movie verse became read. For example, such attentiveness has allowed me to understand how these texts were connected through reappearing visuals and sounds (hence, as I will argue, encouraging transmedial consumption). Likewise, it has helped me to understand the relation between official and unofficial components within the overriding system of significance constituting the 2007 Transformers brand world.

Advertising texts are generally rich in connotating signifiers, which is why semiotics has proven especially well-suited to analyze advertising messages (cf. Williamson, 1978; Leiss, et al., 1986; Cook, 2001). However, employing the notion of “advertising textuality”, Marcel Danesi (2002, p. 188) argues for the usefulness of semiotics in relation to analyses of not only individual advertisements but also of entire campaigns. Here then, the intertextuality term (and its extension into paratextuality, of course) term gains its true relevance. As this concept – and its particular use in this thesis as mainly ‘commercial intertextuality’ – was accounted for in my theoretical framework, I shall not spend more time on it here. However, as will be shown in the following chapter too, the term is valuable when trying to make sense of intertextual commodities like Transformers, in which commodities and paratexts merge in sort of an intertextual symbiosis.

If the notion of intertextuality is one significant semiotic contribution to my study, another is the concept of binary oppositions, which has worked as a tool deconstructing and re-constructing some of my analyzed texts. This applies especially to the texts comprising the ‘Sector Seven’ experience, and most notably the contents found on the campaign’s main website. The term originates from de Saussure’s recognition that “in language there are only differences” and is part of a paradigmatic text analysis that searches for “a hidden pattern of oppositions that are buried in it and that generate meaning” (Saussure, 1966, quoted in Berger, 1998, p. 21). These oppositions may be unknown to the producer as well as to the reader but can be laid bare through a semiotic analysis.
Inspiration from discourse analysis

Given my theoretical interest in the power-relationship between producers and fans of the Transformer world, and my use of texts provided by each of these groups, a discourse analysis-inspired approach has proven helpful as a complement to semiotics. A principle assumption within this tradition is that texts create social values, relationships and identities (Sveningsson, Lövheim & Bergquist, 2003, p. 140). This principle has special bearing on the strand of the tradition which goes under the label ‘critical’ discourse analysis (cf. Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1997; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). On a fundamental level, the method has made me aware of how the professional producers and the fans speak or write of/to each other, which in turn might reveal important clues to the power-relationship between these two groups of agents.

For analysts in the field of critical discourse analysis especially, the purpose of revealing unequal power relationships and – as an effect of this – enabling social change prevails (Sveningsson, et al., 2003, p. 141). In the view of Jonathan Potter, discourse analysis (or DA) has “an analytic commitment to studying discourse as texts and talk in social practices”, and he sees language as a “medium for interaction” (1996, p. 146, original emphasis). This medium, however, is not considered neutral “but as a domain in which our knowledge of the social world is actively shaped” (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 246). Factors such as choice of words, use of metaphors and existence of intertextual links to other texts become analytically relevant for what they say about the relationship between the text’s subjects (Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003).

Hasbro’s annual reports are among the texts to which I have applied a discourse analysis-inspired method, mainly in terms of how they construct the ideal consumer of the company’s brands. In relation to organizational documents, such as annual reports, which ultimately are intended to present the company in a flattering way to shareholders and other interested parties, certain precautions were relevant. As stressed, for example, by Atkinson and Coffey (2004, p. 58), documents are social facts and must be treated as such. As they note, “it is important to realize that documentary reality does not consist of descriptions of the social world that can be used directly as evidence about it” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004, p. 73). Thus, Hasbro’s annual reports do not inform me about Hasbro’s actual operationalization of their branding strategies. This I obtained knowledge of primarily by speaking with company representatives and through text analyses of marketing material, first and foremost. However, precisely because I did approach these documents as social facts rather than as neutral sources of information, I was able to use them for information on the compa-
ny’s implied consumers, and how these are expected to behave within the context of the company’s branding ambitions. The discourse analytical approach, thus, focused my attention on language and choice of words within the reports.

The same largely applies to the news posts delivered on director Michael Bay’s blog and the statements offered on the DVD documentary. Both texts are, essentially, promotional. As Gray (2010) points out, DVD bonus material, for example, is basically a paratext aiming at explaining why the film is worth watching. The interviews found on the Transformers DVD then, along with behind-the-scenes footage and commentaries, are promotional material trying to convince the viewers of the film’s value. In a similar vein, Michael Bay’s blog should be recognized as a marketing device not only for his own “personal” brand and productions, but also for the 2007 Transformers film. This state of affairs has been considered throughout my analysis, which primarily aimed at defining the images of fans emerging in both of these texts.

The fan talk analyzed within the context of the release of the first trailer video and the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign also lends itself to a discourse analysis-inspired reading. As acknowledged by Nancy Baym, online discussions constitute a convenient type of data source in that it – electronically recorded and transmitted as it is – allows the researcher to “collect and examine a wide range of naturally occurring interaction over an extended period of time” (1998, p. 113). Of course, given that fan talk can be regarded a special type of “naturally occurring conversations”, it certainly would not have been too far-fetched to approach this data through a sibling-approach to discourse analysis, namely conversation analysis (Mason, 2002, p. 57). Naturally occurring talk has been defined as “spoken language produced entirely independently of the actions of the researcher” (Potter, 2004, p. 205). It is natural in the sense that “it is not ‘got up’ by the researcher using an interview schedule, a questionnaire, an experimental protocol or some such social research technology” (Potter, 2004, p. 205). Even though forum threads and blog commentaries are not conversations in the sense that live dialogues or virtual chats may be, in important respects, as for example Malin Sveningsson et al (2003) have acknowledged, they do perform the same functions as more synchronic conversations. The reason why I have approached the fan talk through discourse analysis rather than conversation analysis in this study is primarily because what has been said has been more important than how it has been said. Most notably, the fan talk contains valuable clues to the relationship between the official and the unofficial versions of the Transformers world, and thereby also about the relationship between producers and fans. Again, the language and word use found within the fan talk may offer
important clues in regards to these relationships, which is why the selected threads from the forum of TFW2005 as well as the selected news posts and commentaries published on fan blog Transformers Live Action Movie Blog have also been made subject to thorough readings.

The promotional videos analyzed within the context of my study, including both the corporate and the fan-made versions, have been approached through an essentially discourse analysis-based model offered by Peter Dahlgren (2000). This model, which shares its basic premises with Norman Fairclough’s (1995) analytical approach, encourages us to study a media text from a set of six aspects: 1) media context, 2) intentions of the text, 3) expected/intended audience, 4) conditions of production, 5) structure of the text, and 5) societal context. Dahlgren’s model is particularly valuable in that it invites us to study a text not as an isolated entity (as in a more close-reading analysis) but as part of a wider context. In my analysis of the fan-videos, the immediate YouTube-context has, for example, been acknowledged as commentaries offered in relation to these videos were included in the analysis.

6.4.2 Interviews

Interviewing is a valuable way of generating research data, if we agree that “people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality” (Mason, 2002, p. 63). Within qualitative research, the interview situation is generally thought of as a conversation, albeit a structured one with a clear purpose (Kvale, 1997).

Two primary types of interviews have been conducted: personal interviews and focus group interviews. The personal interview method was applied mainly to the professional producers of the Transformers brand, whereas the focus group interview approach was exclusively used with the fans.

Personal interviews

The personal interview is one of the most commonly used methods within social research, and for good reasons. Well-prepared, an interview of this kind can provide valuable, qualitative data which could not have been obtained in any other way. Not least is the method useful when trying to understand the operations undertaken by media organizations and companies (Østbye, et al., 2004). If my text analyses primarily served as means of learning about what the texts produced within the context of the 2007 Transformers movie verse consisted of and looked like – both on a textual and an inter-textual level – my reasons for conducting interviews with involved people relate to other concerns. One im-
portant reason for contacting professionals was to inform myself about details and practicalities regarding the 2007 film marketing campaign, such as when a specific campaign began, which media channels were used to market the film, what strategic collaborations took place, or to double-check information picked up elsewhere (for example from the media). This goes for my interviews with the representatives from UIP, Hasbro Nordic, Kidz Entertainment and Activision Blizzard Nordic AB, and this also explains why I settled for telephone interviews. Berg, for example, holds that: “Qualitative telephone interviews are likely to be best when the researcher has fairly specific questions in mind” (2001, p. 83). To the extent that my interviews with the professionals also came to include reflections, assumptions or ideas on behalf of the informants, I have taken these into consideration in my analyses. These interviews all lasted for around 30 to 60 minutes each.

My interview with writer Simon Furman differs from the rest of my interviews with the professional producers in some important respects. To begin with, it took place in a face-to-face context at the 2010 NordCon convention. Furman was invited to the convention in his capacity as a famous writer of Transformers fiction, and was the only professional producer attending. Although my main aim was to interview Transformer fans, I also took the chance to prepare for a recorded interview with the writer as well. Since this interview came to evolve more around personal reflections and experiences than “pure facts”, it admittedly has more of an in-depth character to it (Kvale, 1997). Yet, due to circumstances beyond my control (a very tight convention schedule with few pauses between events) this interview had to be kept short. While most of my telephone interviews lasted for up till an hour each, my interview with Furman unfortunately had to be concluded after only 20 minutes – a circumstance that of course impacted negatively on the amount of data generated from this interview.

All of my interviews with the professional producers were based on an interview guide with prepared, customized questions (see ‘Appendix 1’). Given their nature as primarily “informative” interviews, the telephone conversations generally included more pointed questions than did my face-to-face interview with Simon Furman. However, in neither of the interviews did I hinder myself or the interviewees to go into directions other than those recommended by my guides, as long as also my more specific questions were answered. Ultimately then, these interviews came to take on a semi-structured character. The semi-structured interview is characterized precisely by its reliance upon themes and its high degrees of flexibility (Østbye, et al., 2004). My two preparatory interviews with
two of the administrators from the NTFA fan community afforded me to gain insights into fan perspectives on *Transformers* at an early phase of my data generating process, and later helped me in my preparations for my focus group interviews with convention attendees. The one hour telephone interview was semi-structured as it was based on a prepared interview guide but occasionally deviated from this, whereas the e-mail interview – due to its written character – naturally afforded less flexibility in terms of topic change or feedback.

**Focus group interviews**

A richer picture of the *Transformers* fans’ understandings, experiences and perceptions about their object of fandom was afforded by my focus group interviews with nine of the attendees to the NordCon convention. As conventions constitute meeting-spots for fans, who otherwise may be geographically scattered (Jenkins, 2006b), this type of event provides the researcher with an excellent opportunity to sample respondents. Focus group interviewing has been defined as “a way of collecting qualitative data which, essentially, involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ on a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177). Like all qualitative interviews, focus group interviews potentially provide the researcher with valuable data in form of reflections, experiences or perspectives, albeit with the particularity that these data are here derived through moderated group discussions. More than the interviews with the professional agents, my focused conversations with the fans can be said to have aimed for phenomenological descriptions in that they were predominantly centered upon the participants’ experiences of, or perspectives on, the *Transformers* world or matters related to it (Kvale, 1997).

Focus groups are commonly composed strategically; that is, with consideration to the participants’ demographics, interests, experiences, or similar. With respect to this, my initial ambition was to form strategically arranged focus groups as platforms for my interviews. Therefore, in my first effort to attract volunteers via the posting on the NTFA community, I asked the interested persons to include the following information in their written responses: nationality, age, gender, and an estimation of their level of interest in the *Transformers*. An original idea was to compose heterogeneous groups, as I believed such constellations would enhance the conversation dynamics in a fruitful way. The significantly unanticipated number of total convention attendees (22 compared to the expected and to me communicated figure of 75!) forced me to rethink my original plan of composing four focus groups with three to four participants in each
group. Also because of this, I had to form groups in a different way than initially planned. With some exceptions, the people in the different groups had not met each other outside of the NTFA forum and had only limited knowledge of each other. Two of the participants had active roles in the arranging of the convention. When asked to estimate their degree of interest in *Transformers* on a scale of 1 to 7, seven of the nine participants ranked it higher than 4 and one ranked it lower than 4. Out of the total number of participants, one was female. Ages ranged from 18 to 41, and the nationalities represented included Sweden (5), Denmark (3) and Holland (1) (see ‘Appendix 2’).

My focus group interviews were based on an interview guide centered on six themes, of which the participants had not been informed beforehand. In case the conversations should be in need of some extra “inspiration”, I had prepared a number of questions related to each of the themes (see ‘Appendix 2’). My interview guide was composed with the belief that my themes could provide understanding of the fans’ experienced relationship with the companies involved in the *Transformers* brand. As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, questions related to the notion of power are very complex and need to be approached carefully. Thus, rather than asking straight-forward questions about the nature of the fan-company relationship, I designed the guide on the assumption that clues to this would surface as the prepared themes were discussed. The interview manual, containing the six themes and open-ended questions related to each of these themes, gave the interviews a semi-structured character.

In the first two group interviews I managed to cover all themes, whereas in the third group I had to give priority to some of them, due to a fraught convention schedule. When asking questions on the third theme, I gave out a prepared model in which the participants were asked to rank different products or brands according to their perceived importance in the *Transformers* universe (see ‘Appendix 3’). The model, which can be thought of as an “onion”, consisted of three circles. The instructions asked the participants to write the name of what they perceived to be the most important aspects of the *Transformers* universe in the core-circle, and then indicate a decline in importance for other products or brands, by placing them further and further away from the inner core-circle. The model was primarily aimed to stimulate the conversations.

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15 This inquiry was included on a “Respondents’ Background”-sheet distributed to the participants at the beginning of each session (see ‘Appendix 4’). Other than asking the fans to estimate their interest in *Transformers*, the sheet asked them to fill in name (optional and for my own purposes as a researcher only), age, gender and nationality.
My objective as moderator was to engage the participants in focused conversations rather than to strictly follow a list of specific questions. As noted by for example Berg, one of the greatest benefits of this technique is the “group dynamic” (2001, p. 112) that is possibly generated and which potentially offsets rewarding conversations. While in certain strands of qualitative research it is this interaction *per se* which is at the center of attention, my primary interest is in *what* was being said during the sessions rather than *how* it was being said. However, as always when a group of people is gathered, some are likely to talk more than others. This is one of the often stressful problems of focus group interviewing (cf. Berg, 2001), why I as moderator had to be attentive to imbalanced conversations. On a general level, though, I did not experience this as a major problem within my focus group sessions since the participants themselves seemed to be receptive to asymmetries and made sure that the more “quiet” participants also were heard.

### 6.5 Overriding principles of data organization

One of the most challenging aspects of doing research is undoubtedly to try to create some kind of order within the rich body of data eventually accumulated. A vital part of the organizing process is to code your data and thereby make it useful for analysis. *Coding*, as explained by Seale and Kelly, “involves placing like with like, so that patterns can be found” (1998, p. 146). It was stressed earlier that my diverse empirical material has demanded flexibility in terms of how this coding has been done. In some cases, my approach was more exploratory and unprejudiced in the sense that themes were “found” within my material; at other instances, my approach departed more readily from themes encouraged by my theoretical framework. In relation to the ‘Sector Seven’ texts, for instance, I eventually discovered patterns in my data that could be made manifest in terms of binary oppositions. In other cases, such as with the online fan talk, my coding was already from the start more strongly anchored in my theoretical terminology, such as the notions of ‘supportive’ and ‘critical’ paratexts. Such a varied approach, I would claim, is evidence of analytic flexibility in relation to the data.

On an overall level, the processing of my empirical data has followed the same key steps regardless of whether it was derived from text analysis or interviews. Following recommendations provided by Mason (2002), as a first necessary step in the coding process I sought to make myself adequately acquainted with my empirical material by reading text descriptions, studying relevant imagery, going through interview transcriptions, and listening to interviews recordings several times. As a second step, and with an eye on my research pur-
pose and questions naturally, I searched the material for themes which the textual data or the interview narratives could be organized into. This organizing was chiefly carried out with keywords which essentially came to make up my coding schemes. Coding schemes have been described as “the creative beginnings of the eventual insights which the researcher hopes to gain by investigating the social world” (Seale & Kelly, 1998, p. 153). From the thematic categories then, I have selected quotes, imagery, examples or statements which have been deemed illustrative or otherwise supportive to the arguments or accounts I have wanted to include in my subsequent results chapters.

6.6 Ethical considerations

Research ethics is relevant to discuss in relation to primarily two of the data generating methods used in my study. Firstly, the interview method places high demands upon the researcher to act according to specific norms, which have been invented to protect respondents. In my initial contact with my respondents – professionals and fans – I have explained the general purpose of my study and stressed the voluntary character of their participation. This information corresponds to the ethical principle of informed consent. Also in my initial contacts with my respondents, and according to the principle of confidentiality, I have stressed the carefulness with which the data would be handled (Berg, 2001). When it comes to anonymity in relation to my focus group interviews with fans, all quotes have been anonymized by use of signatures instead of names (see below). In relation to my interviews with professional producers, names and titles are presented as none of these respondents asked for anonymity. All recordings and transcriptions from my interviews have also been treated carefully. In relation to my focus group interviews, I also asserted that none of the participants were younger than 18, as such participation would have obliged me to gain the approvals of caretakers.

Secondly, something should be said about research ethics in relation to the collected Internet data. Especially, I shall briefly address the question of ethics in relation to data retrieved from online communities, including forums and blogs. As acknowledged by, for example, Sveningsson et al (2003), Internet research poses new questions when it comes to ethics. In my analyses of fan talk from the TFW2005 forum and the Transformers Live Action Movie Blog, I have acted as a “lurker”, meaning that I have followed the conversations without announcing my presence. Thereby, this research fails to live up to the principle of informed consent. However, my side-stepping of this principle can be justified with reference to two important conditions. Firstly, the forum posts and
blog posts included in my analyses have been interpreted as officially published statements, in the sense that they are available for everyone with an Internet connection to access. It can then be argued that already by “going official” like this, the authors voluntarily open themselves to criticisms and scrutiny. Secondly, the nature of the data has not been deemed sensitive in ways that, indeed, Internet conversations can be. In addition to this, the time lag between the entering of the posts and my collecting of them rendered it impossible to announce my presence to the authors. However, to increase the level of anonymity of the post authors I have replaced their actual signatures with invented ones.16

In relation to my accounts of fan interview statements, a signature like, for example, (R3.2) would correspond to respondent no. 3, member of focus group no. 2. In my analyses of the fan talk data generated from TFW2005, a signature like, for example, (P.45.8, 2006, May 15) would refer to poster no. 45, found under thread-rubric 8, dated May 15, 2006. Similarly, in my analysis of fan talk data generated from the Transformers Live Action Movie Blog, a signature like, for example, (P, 2007, April 9) would correspond to poster “no.” f, dated April 9, 200717. Lastly, a signature such as (C23.V1, 2007) in my account of commentaries in relation to the fan-made videos would refer to commentary no. 23, found in relation to video 1, and the year in which the comment was made18.

6.7 Assessing the quality of the study: A self-reflective discussion on validity

In this final section of the chapter I discuss the quality of my research, primarily in terms of validity. The primary purpose here is to give the reader an idea of both the strengths and the limitations of my study, and, ultimately, what questions it can and cannot answer. This, importantly, demands a self-reflexive discussion in which I evaluate my findings and conclusions in relation to the character and quality of my data as well as of analytical procedures. By discussing validity in terms of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ validity, I believe that my assessment of the quality of this study can be presented in a structured and meaningful way (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Internal validity has to do with the credibility of the study, which ultimately is determined by the quality of data selection and sampling (including recording strategies), data or-

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16 This comes with the recognition that search engines such as Google ultimately make it impossible to conceal the origins of any online utterance or phrase.
17 In this strand of fan talk in particular, the signature “Anonymous” is frequently used. When this has been the case, the signature has not been changed according to the described schedule.
18 It should be noted that YouTube only offers information about time passed since a comment was left, counted in “years ago”, meaning that no specific dates are provided.
ganization (including use of concepts and labels) and, in the end, the actual analyses. Although not completely overlapping (see below), the meaning of external validity lies close to that of generalizability. The main question to be posed here is whether or not the knowledge abstracted from the study at hand is applicable to other cases. Notably, both types of validity increase with high levels of transparency in reporting.

Internal validity grows, to begin with, with mechanically recorded data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). In this study, I have endeavored to make my data descriptions and transcriptions as precise as possible, albeit with consideration given to the specific goals of my research. Again, in terms of statements provided by respondents or community members, what has been said has typically been more important than how it has been said. This striving, in turn, demands a good quality of recordings in the first place (Peräkylä, 2004). As previously mentioned, descriptions of texts and transcriptions of interviews have underpinned my analyses. The text descriptions have generally been produced on the basis of recordings, most notably saved screen-shots of websites and video recordings, made either by myself or accessible via the Internet.

My interview transcriptions rely upon audio-recordings which, in the case of the personal telephone interviews, were recorded on a cassette-tape recorder attached to the telephone, and which, in the case of the focus group interviews, were conducted via a dictaphone. All focus groups interviews were also, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, video recorded, which mean that I have had two audio sources to lean on when transcribing these data.

Internal validity increases also with thick descriptions in relation to the analyzed material as well as with the use of scarcely edited or non-edited quotes in the final report (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). When writing the actual research

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19 As a consequence of this, choice of words and phrasings have been transcribed whereas for example body language or hummings have been left out from my transcriptions. Exceptions from this principle include laughter and pauses that have been deemed crucial for how an utterance should be interpreted.

20 As indicated earlier, although I already from the beginning of the research process tried to work under the principle of saving and recording “everything” which could later become of relevance in my analyses, the volume of the 2007 movie verse, and the marketing campaign included, was too all-encompassing for this to be realistic. However, much thanks to accumulative online resources, missing pieces of the “puzzle” have -- to a high degree -- been possible to access retrospectively. Besides fan resources, such as wikis, forums and blogs, the encompassing website database ’Way Back Machine’, which since 1996 archives billions of websites, has occasionally been found fruitful when I have needed to approach my data retrospectively (accessible via URL: http://archive.org/web/ web.php).

21 It should be noted that the poor technical quality of the cassette tapes occasionally rendered it difficult to grasp every single uttering. In addition to this, the fact that the tapes needed to be reloaded by the time they were full on one side forced me to either pause the interview for a few seconds or continue the interview at the expense of a full recording. It is my estimation, though, that no crucial pieces of data were lost due to these technical shortcomings.
report (in this case the dissertation) it is a tough challenge to balance between over- and under-detailed descriptions and between extensive and shortened (or otherwise altered) quotes from participants or texts (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In my own writing, I have endeavored to treat citations with great care and have only edited them to the extent that it can be deemed justified in regard to the analytical context. In relation to this, it should also be acknowledged that many of the statements offered by my informants were responses to questions posed by me as a researcher. This may have effects on validity, as these types of statements would be more dependent on the specific research situation than statements offered more spontaneously (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). However, by giving an account of the contexts in which such statements were made (such as the interview questions or topics to which they relate, or the dialogues they were part of), the reader will stand a better chance of evaluating the credibility of them per se as well as my own interpretations of what was said. Also, by including several instances of unobtrusive measures, such as analyses of naturally occurring fan talk or of already existent texts or documents, my impact on the raw data as a researcher arguably decreases.

Operationalization of concepts and labels is also included in the notion of internal validity (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997), why transparency in how such procedures have been conducted is also important. My overriding principles of data organization were described above, but I want to point out one important aspect in relation to my validity discussion, namely the difficulty of translating abstract theoretical concepts to common language, and vice versa. As made evident, my study is strongly anchored in pre-existing theory; a circumstance that has colored my analyses to higher or lesser degrees. Imposing academic language onto everyday cultural practices, such as media consumption, is always coupled with concerns and therefore demands constant reflectivity on part of the analyst. In order to, if not eliminate so at least decrease the gap between abstract concepts (such as ‘paratexts’, ‘spatialization’ or ‘enunciative fan productivity’, to give a few examples) and the largely everyday language that make up my data, I have – again – sought to enrich my text with thick descriptions and (what I consider to be) a proper amount of examples and quotes. This way, I

22 When shortened by one word or more, my quotations contain the conventional symbol [...] and when I have wanted to highlight some word or phrasing by using italics, this is also clarified in parenthesis. It should be recognized that in cases where I have needed to translate informant statements from Swedish to English, and however careful I have tried to be in my translation, there is of course a risk that language-bound nuances have been lost.
hope, the correlation between theoretical terminology or themes and the data itself is more easily detectable to the reader.

*Selection and sampling* of data concern internal validity but also, importantly, external validity. As pointed out by James H. McMillan and Sally Schumacher (1997), transparency in regard to these procedures is vital for evaluating whether or not one’s findings or insights can be transferred to other cases than the researched one. As repeated elsewhere in this thesis, the data sources brought into this study should be conceived of as a few “windows” out of many on my object of study, and the qualitative character of the research renders the notion of representativity less meaningful than it would have been in a quantitative study. This circumstance, however, should not prevent us from asking questions such as: what impact does my choice of data sources have on my findings and conclusions? Or, alternatively, would a different set of data sources have yielded a different picture of the Transformers brand world and the relationships underpinning it? My decision to make the marketing of the 2007 Transformers film a key platform for my research means that my study has taken place within a certain framework, albeit with diffused borders. While many clues about the producer-consumer relationships underpinning the Transformers brand world are likely to surface also outside of this immediate context, marketing can be regarded a significant meeting-point between companies and their potential customers (cf. Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5), which in turn makes it a suitable platform for investigating the relationships of relevance here.

On spite of the multi-faceted and all-encompassing character of the film marketing as a whole, the number of individual campaigns to map and potentially dig deeper into were in fact limited. They were many, but not infinite. Fan productivity carried out in relation to franchise events, such as a new film, is admittedly much more open-ended in character, as it tends to expand over both time and space. With respect to this circumstance then, my selection of “windows” into the Transformers fandom should also be viewed against the light of the diverse and encompassing bulk of fan texts and channels that exist in relation to the Transformers brand. I believe my selection of specific fan-produced paratexts have been rather well-motivated above, but of course there is the possibility that other sources of data might have occasioned different interpretations of my object of study. In relation to this, it should, for example, be remembered that as a consequence of my selection of the NordCon convention as a platform for focus group interviewing, the fans interviewed for this study were more or less “hard core” fans of the Transformers brand, since they took the trouble to attend a real-life convention. Again though, representativity is not
a criterion in qualitative selection and sampling. What is required is awareness of these kinds of circumstances and transparency in reporting. Such awareness has also worked as an aide-mémoire for me not to generalize from individual fans to groups of fans.

Another question that has arisen during my analytical process, and which can also be related to this, is what effect it has on the validity of this study that I really do not know much about the personal socio-economic background of my informants. As pointed out in the second chapter of this thesis, my focus here is on the relationship – the meeting points – between producers and consumers, which means that processes of socialization largely have not been included. Apart from age, nationality and gender, I do not know more about the fans interviewed than what was revealed through our conversations. This, of course, can be claimed to have a negative impact on the external validity of my study. However, by also analyzing fan conversations retrieved elsewhere – in online fan talk – it can be assumed that the full bulk of data ultimately hold a diversity of fan voices.

Indeed, external validity does increase with a multi-method approach, or ‘triangulation’, such as the one employed here (Denzin, 1970; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). The general idea is that a combination of methods would produce a more nuanced understanding of a phenomenon than one single method would. While I do agree with this assumption, I also align myself with scholars who point out that the employment of a range of methods does not necessarily “give us one ‘objective’ truth” (Silverman, 2001, p. 234). I believe Mason’s perspective on triangulation to be particularly insightful, and my aspiration has, as declared elsewhere, been to approach *Transformers* from ‘different angles’:

At its best, I think that the concept of triangulation – conceived as multiple methods – encourages the researcher to approach their research questions from different angles, and to explore their intellectual puzzles in a rounded and multi-faceted way. This does enhance validity, in the sense that it suggests that social phenomena are little more than one-dimensional, and that your study has accordingly managed to grasp more than one of those dimensions (2002, p. 190).

The usefulness and use of the concept of generalizability in relation to qualitative research has been the subject of much controversy over the years (Alasuutari, 1995), and I shall conclude this chapter by suggesting two fruitful ways of thinking about it in regard to this type of research. One is to employ the notion of *theoretical generalization* (Mason, 2002, p. 195). This kind of generalization is commonly supported by theoretical and strategic sampling, and allows us to
extend our explanations beyond our specific case through sufficiently abstract terminology. With respect to case studies in particular, Yin recognizes that “case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (2009, p. 14). Indeed, it is this type of generalization that affords me to apply previous, largely qualitative, research to the particular *Transformers* case and which would motivate any qualitative research project in the first place. An alternative yet equally attractive way to think about generalization of findings is to think in terms of *possibilities* (Peräkylä, 2004, p. 297). Arguably, what qualitative studies entail are perspectives on what is imaginable; what a phenomenon or event may look like. Following this path, my own findings should add to our knowledge of what worlds of transmedia entertainment may be like and how producers and fans respectively may contribute to their building and promotion. It is now time to present the actual findings of my inquiries into the particular *Transformers* brand world.
7 Building and promoting an ‘immersive brand experience’: Transformers as economy

What does that look like as an online game? Can that be a cell phone? Should that be a TV show? That’s the way we’re thinking about our brands today and our strategy for the company (Brian Goldner, CEO at Hasbro, in Tulsa World, 2008, May 22).

The aim of this first results chapter is to understand Transformers as a strategically and professionally constructed “transmedial world” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). As such, the chapter will draw on the previously presented theory that help us understand how and why these worlds come to look the way they do. Most notably, this theory suggests that today’s entertainment brands, as brands in general, become increasingly valued by companies as immaterial resources and therefore made subject to sophisticated forms of brand management (cf. Arvidsson, 2005; 2006; Moor, 2003; Lury, 2004). A key to understanding the developments of the Transformers world over the last decade, thus, lies in Hasbro’s strategic handling of the brand. As the chapter will show, the Transformers property has undergone some noteworthy “transformations” since its market introduction in 1984 and, in a significantly high degree, these alterations can be traced back to changes in Hasbro’s overall branding strategies. From around the year 2000, and certainly in line with overall developments within contemporary “brand culture” (Lash & Lury, 2008), the explicit goal of Hasbro has been to develop into a ‘branded play company’ and for its properties to become translated into ‘immersive brand experiences’. With a view to gaining further insight into the branding ideals forming the Transformers world, reviews of corporate documents and secondary sources, along with interviews with company representatives, have been conducted.

As the chapter will also suggest, the first Hollywood live action films made on the brand, in year 2007, can be regarded as the ultimate manifestation of the Hasbro’s branding ambitions. Not only did the film per se produce an immersive Transformers experience for capacity audiences; it also spurred a range of marketing activities which to various extents would have contributed to the film experience and which ultimately encouraged the consumers to become involved with the brand, in one way or another. While far from all of the marketing efforts undertaken in connection with this film demanded high levels of audience activity, some particularly consumer engaging initiatives are given special attention in this chapter. As will also be revealed, even seemingly conventional advertis-
The ingredients were utilized as means of creating experiences to be enjoyed by “transmedia consumers” (Scolari, 2009). Thus, against the background of Hasbro’s brand strategies, analyses of a selection of marketing efforts have provided insights into the increasingly complex relation between professional producers and consumers within contemporary worlds of entertainment. Marketing, as recently noted, has been described as “a forum for conversation and interaction” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5) between producers and consumers, so a particularly appropriate platform for investigating the relationship between the two parties can be constituted. Especially in the contemporary era, where traditional advertising is competing with brand experiences (Moor, 2003; Arvidsson, 2006; Lash & Lury, 2008), the consumers’ expected contributions are important to consider. In particular, studies of actual marketing initiatives potentially inform us about the “ideals of consumers” of the Transformers brand in general and to the 2007 film in particular; to whom the brand is aimed and, most importantly, how the consumers are supposed to “participate” in the brand.

While this chapter remains exclusively focused upon the professional handling of the Transformers brand in the context of the first live action film, and aims to provide insights into the producer-consumer relationship mainly by investigating the actual marketing content in relation to branding ideals, the subsequent chapter adds indispensable components to our understanding of this relationship by changing focus to the consumer side. This has been achieved through studies of the consumers’, or fans’, actual responses to some of the marketing efforts, and through accounts of fan productivity that took place with or without direct encouragement from Hasbro or any of the company’s strategic partners. So, it is really only when insights from both these two chapters are brought together that we can “fully” understand of how transmedial worlds like Transformers are built and promoted by professionals and consumers, respectively. Likewise, it is only with the combined knowledge from this and the subsequent chapter that we can initiate a serious and informed discussion about the distribution of power between the two groups of agents engaged in the construction of the Transformers transmedial world. My third and synthesizing results chapter will thus deepen and extend such a discussion.

7.1 Securing spatialization and commodification: The corporate infrastructure of Transformers

As suggested in my theoretical framework and as will be made empirically evident throughout this and the remaining chapters of this thesis – and contrary to the dichotomy nurtured by both political economy and cultural studies – it
makes little sense to think of economy and culture as separate areas of human activity. The heading to this and the subsequent chapter, might seem ill-suited as they imply that economy and culture can actually be conveniently “handled” one at a time. This, obviously, is a simplification of reality. Again, in line with Janice Peck (2006, p. 104), I believe that the cultural studies versus political economy debate “is destined to be interminable until we find a way to surpass the material/symbolic dualism”. What we need, to restate Peck’s argument, is to see economy and culture as ‘a whole’.

Before taking on the tough task of elaborating the discussion of how the economy and culture of Transformers constitute such a whole, it is nonetheless crucial to provide the necessary grounds for this discussion (which is ultimately carried out in chapter 9, ‘Assessing the issue of power’, and in chapter 10, ‘Conclusions and ways ahead’). This chapter therefore begins with an account of the basic corporate infrastructure upon which the Transformers brand relies for its existence, and which ultimately has made possible the spatial expansion of this brand world across platforms, product categories and markets, and thereby also (as subsequent sections will make particularly evident) a continued commodification of the property (Mosco, 1996). Key nodes within this infrastructure, especially with respect to the 2007 live action movie verse, are brand owner Hasbro and media conglomerate Viacom. As the chapter develops, and as my account of Hasbro’s branding strategies advances, many more companies will be added to the picture, including those normally positioned outside of the entertainment industry. Ultimately, the account below of the corporate structure underpinning the Transformers brand, along with later sections of the chapter, will give evidence of the kind of industrial convergence that other researchers have also stressed as characteristic of today’s economy (cf. Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

### 7.1.1 Towards the establishment of the Transformers ‘movie verse’

America-based Hasbro Inc. competes with Mattel Inc. – also an American company and owner of, for example, the Barbie property – for the position of the world’s leading company in children’s entertainment. Table 7.1 below is an indicator of the financial development of the former firm between the years 2004 and 2011, and thereby also a signal of the amount of money that the giants in the toy business deal with. In the U.S alone, and despite the volatile nature of the business at large (Vogel, 2007), toy sales generates over $20 billion annually (Toy Industry Association Inc., 2012).
Since 1923, when Hasbro was founded by Henry and Helal Hassenfeld to manufacture mainly pencil boxes and school supplies, and later also doctor and nurse kits, the company has undergone some significant changes (Hasbro Inc., 2012, September). Most notably, Hasbro’s development over the last couple of decades has transformed the firm from a traditional toy company to an entertainment conglomerate with a serious interest in box-office performances. Thus, it should be emphasized that Hasbro’s interests – and ownership – reach far outside of the traditional toy industry. As a press article effectively observed: “Like one of its own Transformers robots, Hasbro Inc. has spent the last few years trying to change itself from simply a toy company to a business that creates the ideas behind movies, TV shows and electronic games” (Smith, 2007, Oct 19). As evident from the company’s own promotional rhetoric, and as an indicator of the firm’s readiness to position itself within the wider sphere of entertainment, Hasbro wants to be thought of as “a branded play company” that expands its brands across a range of platforms:

Hasbro is a branded play company providing children and families around the world with a wide-range of immersive entertainment offerings based on the Company’s world class brand portfolio. From toys and games, to television programming, motion pictures, digital gaming and a comprehensive licensing program, Hasbro strives to delight its global customers with well-known and beloved brands […] (Hasbro Inc., 2012, May).

This is not the place to tell the whole story of Hasbro’s historical development; what is of interest here is primarily how the transformation described above has
taken place. Apart from actual acquisitions of other toy brands along the way (such as Milton Bradley in 1984, Tonka Corporation in 1991, Wizards of the Coast in 1999), the company’s move into the sphere of mediated entertainment has gone through licensing agreements and strategic alliances with TV-networks, film studios and, most recently, companies specialized on digital entertainment (Hasbro In., 2012, May). As argued by Mosco (1996), such forms of company expansion lie at the core of processes of spatialization within the media and entertainment industries, and bring valuable opportunities to cross-promotion and synergy for the involved firms (cf. Meehan, 1991; Wasko, 1994; Doyle, 2002; Arsenault & Castells, 2008). The subsequent sections of this chapter, which deal with Hasbro’s ‘turn-around’ strategies more thoroughly, will provide more details on some of these collaborations. In this section, I shall point at some of the most significant strategic operations undertaken by Hasbro that help explain the development of the company’s top-brands, including Transformers.

Among the company’s most recent strategic alliances is a joint venture with media company Discovery Communications, which became realized in 2010. This partnership bred a new television network called The HUB, which enables Hasbro to have its action-figures and other toys incorporated into the network’s programming (Hasbro Inc., 2010, January 14). Thus, if the recent live action Hollywood films provided means for Hasbro to develop already existent storylines and character personas around the Transformers brand through cinema, The HUB network performs the same function via television. The partnership between Hasbro and Discovery Communications was announced on April 30, 2009 (Hasbro Inc., 2009, April 30). Almost exactly three years later, in 2012, Hasbro entered an agreement with Netflix, Inc., a company providing Internet subscription services and streaming content to devices such as Microsoft’s Xbox 360, Nintendo’s Wii, Sony’s PS3, Apple’s iPhone, Google TV, a range of Blu-ray disc players, and more. Amongst Hasbro’s shows to stream instantly on Netflix are three Transformers series. In a press release from Hasbro covering the deal, Stephen Davis, president of Hasbro’s content studio Hasbro Studio, identifies the Netflix partnerships as yet another means for the company to make “our content easy to access, anytime, anywhere and on all platforms where audiences are con-

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23 Other recent strategic partnerships entered by Hasbro involves social game developer Zynga Inc. (housing properties such as FarmVille, Hidden Chronicles, Scramble With Friends and Empires & Allies) and Volymique, a French company providing technologies that enable play on interactive screens found in, for example, smart phones and computers.
In the development of the 2007 *Transformers* movie verse (and succeeding film franchises), a decisive moment was the strategic alliance that Hasbro entered into along with film studios Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks, both of which were owned by giant conglomerate Viacom at that point in time. The partnership was announced in an early press release from Hasbro, which also specified the conditions for the collaboration: “Hasbro will work with the production team, DreamWorks and Paramount on all aspects of the film’s creative development, marketing, promotions and will manage merchandising in conjunction with the release of the film” (Hasbro Inc., 2004, July 23). Thus, as this announcement implies, Hasbro entered into the licensing agreement with the determination to be involved at all stages of the production process, thereby ultimately controlling how the *Transformers* property was being handled by the partners. In the same press release, Brian Goldner, at that time President of Hasbro’s toys segment, expressed the company's enthusiasm over the film project by stating that “we are thrilled to give millions of fans an extraordinary experience that’s never been done in the history of the brand”.

For brand owner Hasbro, apparently, the film was believed to constitute a significant landmark for the durable *Transformers* property. For the film companies, the goal was to make the brand attractive to an audience beyond the children’s segment. Prior to the 2007 film, in numerous media interviews, director Michael Bay declared that he “definitely did not make a toy movie” (cf. Fuchs, 2007, January 16). At the same time, executive vice president for international marketing at Paramount Pictures International, Jon Anderson, summarized the challenge that the distributors were faced with in the following few lines: “We really recognize that for most people, *Transformers* is a toy. Our job is to change that perception” (Fuchs, 2007, January 16).

The division of labor between the film studios rendered a situation where DreamWorks would distribute the film domestically, whereas Paramount Pictures would handle the international distribution (Hasbro Inc., 2004, July 23). Paramount Picture’s acquisition of DreamWorks SKG in 2006 not only made the two film studios closer partners in time for the making and distribution of the 2007 *Transformers* film, but also made both companies parts of the encompassing Viacom conglomerate. Paramount Communications Inc. is part of the Viacom group since 1994, and subdivision Paramount Pictures Corporation is today one of the largest entertainment and media brands in the world, responsible for the worldwide production, sales and marketing of filmed entertain-
ment from, amongst others, Paramount Pictures\textsuperscript{24} (Viacom Inc., 2012a). DreamWorks, which started off as an independent company founded by Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen in 1994, left the Viacom group already two years after the acquisition, in 2008, and is today partly owned by Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group. Most of the company’s pictures are currently marketed and distributed by The Walt Disney Studios\textsuperscript{25} (DreamWorks SKG Inc., 2012).

The goal of Viacom, according to the company’s own rhetoric, is “to be the world’s leading, branded entertainment company across television, motion pictures and digital media platforms” (Viacom Inc., 2012b). To reach this objective and to “sustain growth”, the company claims to “focus on our consumers, enhancing our existing brands, developing new brands and executing on our multiplatform strategy” (Viacom Inc., 2012b). Admittedly, it is striking to find how similar Hasbro, once a traditional toy company, and the genuine media conglomerate Viacom present their goals and ambitions in their respective promotional discourses. Most notably, both companies seem to rely on what Viacom explicitly calls a “multiplatform strategy” to re-boost existing brands and to create, what Hasbro calls, “immersive entertainment”. This strategy was certainly implemented in the launch of the 2007 Transformers movie verse, which eventually spanned the immediate sphere of “play” and “entertainment” and beyond. As also shown in the section below, the strategy is emphasized in Hasbro’s strategic documents as one of the key ingredients in the company’s recently articulated ‘brand blueprint’.

7.2 Hasbro’s ‘brand blueprint’: Turnaround strategies for building a ‘branded play company’

The Transformers brand is considered one of Hasbro’s “core brands”, according to the company’s own wording. However, the brand has not been given the same amounts of attention and care during its long existence. Although new toylines and accompanying media have been launched on a frequent basis, the brand has had periods when its role in relation to other brands in the Hasbro portfolio has been modest. As argued above, the development of the Transformers

\textsuperscript{24} Paramount Pictures Corporation also includes Paramount Digital Entertainment, Paramount Famous Productions, Paramount Home Entertainment, Paramount Pictures International, Paramount Licensing, Paramount Studio Group and Worldwide Television Distribution. The company has a library of more than 1000 films, including titles from the Star Trek, Godfather and Indiana Jones series as well as non-sequels such as Braveheart, Forrest Gump and Titanic (Viacom Inc., 2012).

\textsuperscript{25} DreamWorks Studio’s portfolio of films includes blockbusters such as Saving Private Ryan, American Beauty, A Beautiful Mind (co-produced with Universal Pictures), Castaway (co-produced with 20th Century Fox) and Shrek. In 2009, Paramount released the remainder of the films produced by DreamWorks including the second live action Transformers film, Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen.
ers brand in the last decade, with the live action Hollywood films as the most spectacular elements, can really only be understood with reference to Hasbro’s overall branding strategies. For this reason, it is motivated to begin this chapter with an account of these strategies: how they have been explicitly changed since around the year 2000 – and how these changes, in turn, are reflected in the Transformers brand.

A review of the company’s annual reports during the last 14 years (1997-2010), which forms the main basis of this section, makes evident that the Transformers brand has gained significance over the same period. More than anything, this manifests itself in the amount of written space dedicated to the brand and the increased emphasis placed on it in company documents. In line with the above, the annual reports also shed some revealing light upon Hasbro’s development from a traditional toy company to an entertainment company with significant interests in the media business. Particularly from the year 2000, many efforts have been made not only to build bridges to the media sector, but also to become part of it. Consequently, the Transformers consumers have to an increasing extent become constructed as consumers of media experiences. Needless to say, such a development goes hand in hand with previous observations regarding the role of brands as experience in today’s consumer culture (cf.; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Moor, 2003; Ritzer, 2005; Arvidsson, 2005; 2006), and concerning the fusion of material goods and media stories (cf. Hjavard, 2004; Lash & Lury, 2008).

7.2.1 Reinventing success: ‘Growing core brands’

During the last years of the 1990s, Hasbro laid down the foundations to a new “formula for success” that would transform both the company and some of its properties in essential ways (Hasbro Inc., 1997, p. 1). This formula, which still seems to guide the company’s brand management, consists of a set of key strategies which, with some modifications, have been emphasized in the company’s annual reports for over a decade. One of the key strategies demands a sharpened focus on the company’s core brands. In the 2006 annual report, for example, these durable brands are appreciated for constituting one of the company’s main resources:

One of our greatest assets is the strength of our core toy and game brands. We have the best and most beloved brands in the business – brands that are well-known, trusted and valued by millions of consumers worldwide for providing fun, entertaining play experiences for the kid that exists in all of us (p. 5).

In the various reports, differences exist as to which of Hasbro’s brands are actually emphasized as core brands. Among the repeatedly mentioned brands are,
for example, My Little Pony, Monopoly, Tonka, G.I. Joe, Action Man, Playskool, Mr. Potato Head, Easy Bake, Risk, Scrabble – and Transformers. Not so surprisingly, brands that have significantly affected the overall financial results in a particular year tend to be mentioned among the first in the report. To a certain extent, the prominence given to specific brands is also reflected visually in the reports; the most “important” brands are often featured on the cover, for instance.

While earlier annual reports also make use of the term “core brands”, it was only from the millennium that they became object of the outspoken strategy that still today holds a central place at Hasbro. In the 2000 annual report, this strategy, along with certain others (see below), is claimed to have taken Hasbro into a new era, and in the report on 2001, the strategy is already celebrated for creating positive results for the company: “2001 was a turnaround year for Hasbro U.S. Toys segment. Importantly we believe that we have the right strategy in place – led by our core brands – and we are confident that we can enjoy continued success in this area going forward” (p. 4). Elsewhere in the same report, the following ambition is articulated: “As we move forward, we will continue to leverage our core brands in highly creative ways. Our properties are a “Who’s Who” in childhood memories, and we intend to create future memories for coming generations […]” (p. 4). As these and similar statements from the reports suggest, the chief idea behind Hasbro’s core brand strategy is to build future successes on already proven properties, or on what could perhaps be thought of as the company’s “high-concept” properties (Wyatt, 1994/2006).

As articulated in later annual reports, the core brand strategy means that well-liked and reliable brands shall be developed “to their fullest potential”, leveraged “in highly creative ways” and made “relevant to today’s consumers” (2005, p. 5). Ultimately, Hasbro’s ambition to reinvent and revitalize its classic brands encourages these properties to be “introduced in new formats and platforms” (2004, p. 34), that is, to go through what Jordan (2004, p. 461) has called “branded hyperdifferentiating”. This strategy indeed rimes well with the general developments within the entertainment industries, which were accounted for in my theoretical framework. The explicit goal of Hasbro to create more secure streams of capital into the company by developing popular brands into new directions can certainly be interpreted as a strategy on behalf of the company to avoid the risks normally associated with the production of entertainment commodities (cf. Ryan, 1992; Murray, 2003; 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Grainge, 2008; Vogel, 2007). This goal, in turn, is mainly achieved by moving the core brands outside of the original toy or game segment. Most notably, reinvention seems to happen with the help of mediated entertainment.
7.2.2 Streaming across platforms: Creating ‘immersive brand experiences’

As evident from the Transformers genealogy (see chapter 1, ‘Introduction’, for a summary of this), Hasbro has long realized the value of having its properties connected to various kinds of mediated entertainment, such as comic books, film or television. However, a reading of the company’s documents suggests that the emphasis on media as brand platforms has peaked in the last decade. Already in the 1999 annual report, it is recognized that core brands have content that, to use Murray’s (2003; 2005) terminology, can be “streamed” into other product categories or platforms, and thereby enable spatial growth of these brands and continued commodification (Mosco, 1996). For example, in this report, it is stressed that: “Our unmatched content and emphasis on technology will unlock new and exciting possibilities for everyone who enjoys play” (p. 4), and that “Hasbro will win by shaping its powerful and versatile content beyond traditional toys and games into additional forms of leisure time play and entertainment” (p. 4). Putting further weight on these aspects, the 1999 report also proclaims that “it is content that distinguishes Hasbro from the rest” (p. 6).

As noted in my theoretical framework, parallel to the growth of significance of intellectual properties as core assets to entertainment companies, licensing has grown into an increasingly lucrative business. Now, the highlighting of content in the 1999 annual report must be connected to the fact that 1999 was the year that Hasbro’s licensing division Hasbro Properties Group (HPG) was formed. The main mission of this division is to translate Hasbro’s portfolio of brands “into a world of fun and excitement for children and adults globally” (Hasbro Inc., 2007, October 11). Or, as it reads in the 1999 report, to develop “the underlying fantasy” to each of Hasbro’s properties and thereby prepare them for a life in, for example, television, film, digital media or print. This was what happened when, for instance, the Action Man brand became television programming for the Fox Kids Network in 1999. Yet, while the focus on content in the 1999 report can be connected to the development of HPG, later years’ report discourses have done nothing but to continue along the same line. In the 2005 annual report, for instance, the need to create synergistic links between toys – in particular the action figures segment – and media content is further stressed: “In the action figure area, a key part of our strategy focuses on the importance of reinforcing the storyline associated with these products through the use of media-based entertainment, primarily television” (Hasbro Inc., 2005, p. 13).

One year later, though, new terminology begins to appear in the reports that will gain increased relevance for Hasbro in general and for the Transformers
brand in particular. In the 2006 annual report, the core brand strategy is claimed to involve a “more holistic approach” (p. 6) to the company’s brands, creating “the most effective and appropriate brand experience” (p. 6) for the consumers. In fact, the Transformers brand is mentioned as “an excellent example” of this new approach. In later reports, the ambition to build “immersive brand experiences” is even more articulated. As stated in the 2007 report, for instance: “Delivering new immersive entertainment experiences by expanding and contemporizing our brands continues to be a major focus for Hasbro” (p. 3). Similar terminology reappears also in the 2008 report, in which digital games, along with various types of “lifestyle” products, are stressed as key arenas for building such experiences:

> When our consumers are not playing with Hasbro brands, they can still experience Hasbro via our lifestyle licensing and publishing efforts. Through our robust global licensing program, Hasbro brands permeate our consumers’ day to day lives in a number of categories including publishing, apparel, party goods, and back to school. So every child can go to school with, celebrate with, and dress head to toe with their favorite Hasbro brands (p. iii).

As suggested in this quote, the company strives not only for spatial growth of its properties but also for these to have constant presence in the lives of their customers. In the 2009 annual report, both of these objectives are articulated, as the logic behind the core brand strategy is explained: “Our core brand strategy is simple. We create immersive brand experiences for consumers of all ages in any form or format they want, anytime or anywhere, around the world” (p. 1). While this statement does little more than to repeat the mantra of preceding reports, albeit in different wordings, the 2009 annual report presents further examples of how the core brand strategy is being realized. Apart from telling the story of how the Transformers brand has been turned into a brand experience, the report also mentions the establishment of Hasbro Studios and the forming of the previously mentioned new children’s television network, The HUB. Apart from making possible the “expanding [of] the brand experience” (p. iii), these new components provide the Hasbro conglomerate with additional revenue opportunities.

Hence, to a seemingly increasing extent, Hasbro identifies and accentuates their established brands as main vehicles for further product development. The company seeks for “activation across platforms” and thereby sets its brands to grow in both scope and range. This brand philosophy, or “brand blueprint”, is well summarized in the 2009 annual report. As evident from the quote below, the re-use of successful concepts is once again made explicit as part of the company’s overriding brand strategy:

> Our brand blueprint is the starting point. Two years ago, we rewired the organization to put brands at the very center of everything we do as we re-imagine, re-invent and re-ignite our brands. It begins with toy and game product innovation and extends to all consumer touch
points including lifestyle licensing, entertainment – television, movies and online – as well as digital gaming. We then employ this blueprint across our mature, developing and emerging markets (p. 1).

7.2.3 Forming alliances: ‘Choosing the right strategic partners’

The core brand-strategy continues to be underlined as one, if not the, most significant component of Hasbro’s “formula for success”. From the annual reports, it is evident that this strategy was intended as a break with earlier ways of doing things within the company. One crucial aim was to focus more resolutely on in-house property and hence to become less dependent upon external companies. By all means, the benefits of the conglomerate business structure is that is has its own internal markets on which repacked and recycled commodities can be circulated (Meehan, 2000). As Hasbro has extended its ownerships and thereby developed such markets, the decreasing interest in buying licenses is understandable.

Like other toy and entertainment companies, Hasbro has a history of licensing agreements by which the rights to use popular film or comic book characters, for instance, have been acquired at high costs. In the 1997 annual report – before Hasbro’s strategic turnaround was strictly articulated – licensing agreements still played a prominent role. For instance, when accounting for the most recent successes within the boys’ toys segment, only one of the brands mentioned (the last on in order) was a Hasbro-owned property: “We continue to be the leader in Boys toys. Star Wars© is the number one male action toy line in the industry. Jurassic Park and Batman© sold well, as video releases in the fourth quarter re-ignited excitement, and Action Man sales in International marketing grew almost 40%” (p. 2). In the 1999 report, the Star Wars brand, and the most recent film especially, is emphasized as a driver of the company’s financial success.

However, as stressed also in my theoretical framework, licensing agreements involve some obstacles (Vogel, 2007). Except for being expensive, licensed media material is always coupled with a certain degree of risk. While a successful blockbuster might trigger the sales of a related toyline, a theatrical failure can be devastating for the licensee. This aspect is recognized also in Hasbro’s own documents, for example in the 2000 annual report: “We may not realize the full benefit of our licenses if the licensed material has less market appeal than expected or if sales revenue from the licensed period is not sufficient to earn out the minimum guaranteed royalties” (p. 23). As also recognized, this time in the 2004 annual report, while licensed toylines generally can be sold at higher prices, expenses connected to licensing agreements tend to counterweight this advantage (p. 35).
Thus, probably for these reasons, Hasbro decided to change its balance between company-owned and licensed properties, in favor of the former category. As it reads in the earliest pronouncements of this strategy, from year 2000: “While we value our relationships with our key entertainment partners and recognize that they will always be important, we must put a higher emphasis on growing our core brands” (p. 1). Still, as this quotation also reveals, although the ambition is to reduce reliance upon external properties, these do continue to play an important role within the company. For example, around the millennial shift, media brands such as *Harry Potter, Jurassic Park III, Bob the Builder and Monsters Inc.* constituted important sources of inspiration for Hasbro’s toylines, and a new “strategic corporate alliance” (2000, p. 3) with Disney was entered. In a similar vein, later reports acknowledge the value delivered to the company through licensing agreements with media actors Lucasfilm and Marvel.

These and other strategic partnerships between Hasbro and actors within the media sector indeed helped Hasbro build “immersive brand experiences”. Again, by connecting toys with different kinds of mediated entertainment, the brand becomes ever-present and the spaces in which consumers can potentially enjoy the brand multiply. What is more, these strategic partnerships also contribute to the integration of sectors within the entertainment industry, as toy companies and media actors come to develop mutual interests in the same line of brands. To speak with Hesmondhalgh, what Hasbro is breeding are complex “webs of interdependence” (2007, p. 176). This joint interest, in turn, has one important consequence for all transmedial entertainment brands: they tend to be backed by massive marketing support from multiple actors.

### 7.2.4 Creating synergy: Integrated marketing and cross-promotion

Like other entertainment companies, Hasbro relies on advertising to sell its products. The chart below summarizes the company’s total advertising expenses over the last 15 years.
In Hasbro’s annual reports, explanations are provided regarding the increases and decreases in advertising expenses during the period of time covered by the above diagram. For example, the considerable decrease in advertising spending between years 2000 and 2001 is explained with reference to a consolidation program, lower general expenditures, lower media costs and “more efficient use of advertising spending” (Hasbro Inc., 2001, p. 37).

While 2001 constituted a year in which Hasbro’s advertising expenses were unusually low, the subsequent years saw a general increase. Tellingly, this shift coincided with Hasbro’s millennium turnaround strategies, by which the company’s core brands came to occupy a more central space in relation to external licenses. In the 2002 annual report, this connection is also mentioned as the advertising expenses are calculated to increase the following year: “The Company expects advertising expense to increase in both dollars and as a percentage of net revenues in 2003 as it increases promotion of its core brands” (p. 37). Similarly, in the 2003 report – after the actual increase had begun – the link between advertising expenses and the new core brand-strategy is once again recognized: “The increases reflect the Company’s greater focus on marketing to increase and maintain awareness of its core brands, as well as to introduce new products” (p. 44).

Interestingly, the relative decrease in 2005 is explained with reference to higher sales of Star Wars products, “which do not require the same amount of advertising as the Company’s non-entertainment based products” (p. 38). Thus, it is Hasbro’s experience that entertainment-related products need less advertising support than do others. In later reports, for example from 2009, this wisdom reappears:
In years in which the Company has significant sales of products related to major motion picture releases, such as in 2009, advertising expense as a percentage of revenue is generally lower, as such products do not require the same level of advertising that the Company spends on non-entertainment based products (p. 30).

Against the background of what was stressed in my theoretical chapters, this reasoning indeed makes sense. Transmedial entertainment, which develops across a range of media platforms and product categories, has the advantage of existing in a constant state of cross-promotion (cf. Kinder, 1991; Wernick, 1991; Jansson, 2002; Marshall, 2002). Synergistic links emerge between toys, media texts and all other franchise products so that, in the end, every product serves as advertisement for the next (Wasko, 2004). Indeed, Hasbro’s synergistic, or “integrated” (Hasbro Inc., 2002, p. 5) approach to marketing and advertising to a great extent underpins the company’s entire brand management philosophy. In the 2009 annual report, for example, this philosophy is described the following way:

We advertise many of our toy and game products extensively on television. Generally our advertising highlights selected items in our various product groups in a manner designed to promote the sale of not only the selected item, but also other items we offer in those product groups as well (p. 6).

Thus, Hasbro makes explicit that its advertising efforts normally are directed at more than one product at the time. Likewise, the company makes no secret of the, recognized fact, by Meehan (1991) for example, that out-licensing efforts serve a double purpose: as additional revenue sources and as promotion of its core-brands. Explaining the purpose and functions of the company’s ‘Entertainment and Licensing segment’, the 2010 annual report reads:

Our Entertainment and Licensing segment includes our lifestyle licensing, digital licensing, movie, television and online entertainment operations. Our lifestyle licensing category seeks to promote our brands through the out-licensing of our intellectual properties to third parties for promotional and merchandising uses in businesses which do not compete directly with our own product offerings, such as apparel, publishing, home goods and electronics (p. 5).

In the same annual report, Hasbro particularly stresses its efforts to extend its brands “into the digital world” (p. 35) and, as with other kinds of out-licensing, these efforts are acknowledged for having positive effects on consumer awareness. In addition to this, Hasbro sees its latest investments in television as an important advertising vehicle. Television in general has always constituted a key advertising platform for Hasbro, and with the forming of The Hub network – through the alliance with Discovery – the opportunities to make the company’s properties visible multiplied (cf. Hasbro Inc., 2009, p. iii). Apart from merchandise, games and television programming, major motion pictures, of course, have become increasingly important as a means of promotion for Hasbro. Also on
this matter, as made manifest in the 2006 and 2010 annual reports, the company is open about its objectives:

*Given the strength of its core brands, the Company may also seek to drive product-related revenues by increasing the visibility of its core brands through entertainment-based theatrical venues. As an example of this, in July of 2007, the TRANSFORMERS motion picture is expected to be released and the Company has developed products based on the motion picture that will be marketed in 2007 (2006, p. 32).*

 [...] *we also seek to promote and leverage our brands through major motion pictures (2010, p. 3).*

Hence, Hasbro’s advertising budgets – however impressive – only tells half of the story of how the company grows its brands. Even more important are investments in various types of mediated entertainment, by which the company’s core brands are made increasingly visible. Ultimately, Hasbro’s endeavor to create “immersive brand experiences” by delivering their properties in a range of forms and formats should also be understood as a way to enhance brand awareness. The following quotation especially, extracted from the 2010 annual report, makes explicit this link between anticipated consumer practices and promotion-related goals: “Promotion of our brands through major motion pictures and television programming provides our consumers with the ability to experience our brands in a different format which we believe can result in increased product sales, royalty revenues, and overall brand awareness” (p. 15). In the end, Hasbro’s core brand-strategy, the focus on brand experiences, the motivation to form alliances with other entertainment companies, and the objective to build brand awareness across media platforms and product categories, are all steps in Hasbro’s ambition to become “a branded play company”. This goal is articulated in the latest annual report to date, from 2010:

*Today, we are well into the implementation of our strategy toward becoming a branded play company. However, we are in the early stages of reaching our full potential. With eight mega-brands as our focus, 150 actively marketed brands, and a vault of 1,500 brands and properties at our disposal – all of this with an additional focus on imagining new brands – we believe there is a tremendous untapped opportunity ahead for Hasbro (p. 7).*

Certainly, when considering Hasbro’s efforts in the last decade to become such a wide-reaching company, it becomes evident that it is not just a toy business any longer. In a press release from 2008, in which the company’s six-year strategic partnership with film studio Universal Pictures was announced, Brian Goldner himself pointed out that “Today’s Hasbro is so much more than a traditional toy and game company” (Hasbro Inc., 2008, February 20).
7.2.5 Hasbro’s implied consumers: From ‘consumers’ to ‘audiences’

As noted, Hasbro’s strategic plans, as articulated in the corporate documents and as realized in the company’s transformation into an entertainment company focused on immaterial, mediated, property, fit remarkably well with previous accounts of the general trends and patterns in contemporary brand, consumer, and convergence culture (cf. Mosco, 1996; Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2005; 2005; Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). But then, what do Hasbro’s self-proclaimed branding strategies tell us about their wished-for relationship with the consumers? The annual reports do provide some relevant clues on this. Most importantly, the ambition to produce “immersive brand experiences” rather than “merely” products is based on the assumption that the consumers are willing to explore entire brand worlds. For, again, it is through brand “activation across platforms” and the delivery of brands “in any form or format”, “to all consumer touch points”, that these experiences are intended to be created (Hasbro Inc., 2009). The ideal Hasbro consumer would thus be someone ready to engage with the company’s brands in more than one way and over more than one product-category. Indeed, the frequent use of the term brand alone can be claimed to provide clues about the company’s anticipated consumer-relationship. Ultimately, and especially when used in connection with the word lifestyle, this could be taken as evidence of a consumer approach which, at least rhetorically, entails more than a delivery of ready-made packages of products (although, of course, in reality it is precisely the material, all the “stuff”, which form the basis for the “brand experiences”) and instead relies on the consumer to actively search for enthralling experiences. Such an observation, in turn, resonates with previously presented accounts of contemporary company goals to “cultivate” (Hardy, 2011) consumer engagement.

The determination to form alliances with the media sector represents the perhaps most obvious tactic to create fruitful grounds for brand experiences. Ultimately, Hasbro’s brands should be understood in terms of Arvidsson’s (2006, p. 75) content brands or Scolari’s (2009, p. 590) narrative brands, that is, brands which are built on narrative elements which can be used to develop new commodities. In the 2005 annual report, “the importance of reinforcing the storyline” was particularly associated with the company’s action figure area, to which Transformers inescapably belongs. Consumers of Transformers are thus counted on to have an interest not only in the company’s robot toys and related products, but also in the fiction delivered by Hasbro’s licensees within the media sector as well as by the company itself (though The HUB network, for instance). In this context, it also makes sense that the company’s strategic documents refer to the
potential experience-seekers not only as consumers but also as “audiences” (as in Hasbro Inc., 2008); a term that most companies in the entertainment industry would use for its target segments.

7.3 Creating ‘worldness’: Transformers as content brand

In Japan there was no good guy, bad guy. They didn’t have a home planet; they didn’t have personalities or stories. So that came from those meetings in Hasbro (Aaron Archer, Director of boys design at Hasbro, in the Transformers DVD documentary).

Content is recognized as a key resource for Hasbro, and therefore it is not very surprising to see that the Transformers brand has continuously been reincarnated into new media commodities, such as video games and motion pictures. Processes of mediatization (cf. Jansson, 2002; Hjavard, 2004) are central to transmedial worlds like Transformers, which ultimately are created through a double-directed process that, according to Scott Lash and Celia Lury (2008), entails a true industrialization of culture. They exist in a global culture industry in which “the thingification of the media” takes place next to “the mediation of things” (Lash & Lury, 2008, p. 85).

To be fair though, the insight that material goods and content can be beneficially integrated was not new to the “millennial” Hasbro. As briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter, Transformers was never only a toyline – at least not until the originally Japanese invention became a Hasbro property. In Japan, the toys came without names and personalities, and as the quote above reveals, the fiction-lore associated with the brand was a Hasbro creation, ultimately set off to increase the “marketability” (cf. Wyatt, 1994/2006) of the brand. In a press interview from 2007, one of the writers of the Transformers comic book and editor in chief at Marvel comics, Jim Shooter, is cited explaining the decision to add a narrative to the Transformers toys: “They figured that American kids want to know why the robot turns into a car or a truck” (Breznican, 2007, June 29). Making this connection between toys and media narrative, Hasbro was among the first companies to take advantage of the less rigid, and occasionally heavy criticized, advertisement regulations connected to children’s entertainment that the Reagan administration had formulated (Kline, 1993).

Thus, already from the start in the early 1980s, Hasbro decided to build a world around the brand, by constructing a background story and by turning the robots into full-fledged characters. As told by interviewed comic book writer and author Simon Furman, this was done in collaboration with comic book publisher Marvel, also an American company and home of classic comic-book
characters like Spiderman, Iron Man, X-Man, Hulk and Captain America. The previously quoted Jim Shooter is accredited for having invented the mechanical world of Cybertron, the Transformers’ home planet, whereas Bob Budiansky is famous for having come up with many of the character names and personalities (Breznican, 2007, June 29). In the company of Shooter and Budiansky, Furman eventually became one of the most influential writers involved in the development of the Transformers fiction. While initially having been rather, in his own view, restricted in terms of artistic creativity, and subordinated to Hasbro’s and Marvel’s goals with the narrative, he did eventually come to gain more autonomy as to how the story could be built. During out interview, he explained his ambitions with the fiction in the following way:

You know, I took and made it, I think, a more sort of intergalactic story as opposed to just Cybertron and Earth and maybe one or two other worlds. I pushed it, sort of, into this big space opera thing that I love and, you know, laid some legend and myths behind it and the characters, so there was kind of this feeling of age and ancientness to the race and everything.

Thus, linked to the toys came a story about good and evil robots fighting for the command of universe, and according to interviewed Hans-Christian Ulrich, marketing manager at Hasbro Nordic, this narrative can be considered one of the most crucial aspects when trying to understand the popularity of the Transformers toys over the years. In particular, he explains the revitalized interest in the brand from the first years of the new millennium with reference to television support. From his perspective evidently, it was the coordinating efforts with broadcasters, along with new product development, which made the brand “more alive” during this period in the brand’s recent history:

Yeah, I really think it was a combination of both the TV-series and Hasbro’s up-scaling in products development and everything, so that it became much more alive and also that we started to coordinate a bit more with the broadcasters. And that’s sort of the key. Cos, I mean, the key thing about boy’s toys today is that you can’t actually launch a new action figure without having some kind of entertainment going around it.

Thus, in the view of the marketing manager, and in resonance with earlier observations (cf. Hjavard, 2004; Kline, 1993; Pecora, 1998), today’s toys demand the framing of a media story in order to even stand the chance of becoming successful. Attempting to explain the popularity of the Transformers brand on a general level, Ulrich again accentuates “the fantastic story” – along with the innate “play-value” of the products themselves:

Well, I think that the uniqueness is that there are a lot of fantastic characters and you’ve got a fantastic story in terms of... it’s based on a very simple story. You have the evil, that is the Decepticons who want to conquer the world, and then the Autobots to protect the world. That’s how the story should be! So, I think that the uniqueness with Transformers is that
you have a story. And that’s just one part of it, the other is that you have some reall y, really good products also.

To Ulrich then, the classic battle between “good” and “evil” is essential to the brand, as is the wide spectrum of characters that inhabit the Transformers world. It is also this aspect of the franchise which, in Ulrich’s view, separates it from other character-driven franchises. Basically, the Transformers franchise offers a character for “everybody” to identify with:

[…] you have a clear set of heroes and villains. I mean, you don’t just have one, like for example with Spiderman, which is also one of our characters. But you have both “Optimus Prime”, you have “Bumblebee”, you have a lot of different heroes on the goodies’ side and on the villains’, and you also have a lot of… you have “Starscream”, you have “Megatron”. And so, if you want to, it is not like Spiderman where everybody wants to be Spiderman because he is the main, main, main character and then you have one or two villains.

With experience from film marketing in general and the Transformers film in particular, UIP’s Mats Jegéus shares a similar understanding of the importance of narratives to franchise products. Discussing possible synergistic links between media – film especially – and toys, he stresses the fact that such links cannot be created ad hoc. In his own words, there has to be “some kind of spontaneous, intellectual, emotional connection” between the commodities. He refers to Star Wars as an early example of such an intimate link between media and toys, but predicts that the trend will continue to grow:

I really do believe that it comes, more and more and more. Irrespective of what it is, but primarily toys. If you ask someone in England or so what they want for Christmas, a little boy or a girl, then they might want Batman-toys or Superman-toys. And then, of course, there has been a movie released just before.

These insights, in turn, can be related to the strategic thinking that underpinned the licensing decisions made in relation to the 2007 movie verse. As explained by interviewed Karola Hesselberg-Thompson, the objective of Kidz Entertainment – the Danish licensing agency which handled the Transformers brand in the Nordic region – was to find “synergies” between different licenses and to coordinate the marketing in relation to these products. Prior to the film’s release, therefore, the company arranged two meetings with some of the largest license holders, including Activision, Egmont International, Toys R’ Us, and Paramount Pictures. The first of these meetings took place one year ahead of the film’s theatrical debut, and the second was held six months before the actual event. As expressed by Hesselberg-Thomsen, the licensing agency sought to pay special attention to the Transformers brand’s innate “transformability” when selecting licensees:
Thus, in choosing between possible partners, Kidz Entertainment was especially appreciative of innovative product designs that resonated with the brand’s core content. Arguably then, in this situation at least, the transformability inherited in the property was identified as a strong marker of its “marketability” (Wyatt, 1994/2006).

Telling the story of Transformers is not easy, however. Mainly due to its development over a fairly long period of time and the involvement of a large number of publishers and writers, the Transformers narrative contains many inconsistencies and conflicting storylines. In the words of Furman, because of these multiple and sometimes contradictory storylines, Transformers can even be claimed to constitute a “multiverse” as opposed to a “universe” (Furman, Ryall, & Figueroa, 2007, p. 58). Overall though, authors and marketers of Transformers seem to share the conception that the brand’s “worldness” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004) is a key to understanding its attraction to consumers. As the subsequent chapter will show, the fans seem willing to confirm these ideas.

7.3.1 From ‘niche’ to ‘mainstream’ brand

As a result of changes in Hasbro’s overarching branding strategies, the Transformers world has grown tremendously during the first decade of the new millennium. The biographies on the backside of the toy packages, the television series and the comic books, which along with the 1986 animated film provided the basic fundamentals of the fictional universe, still today enrich the Transformers property with background stories and personalities. However, as the Transformers property was brought into the new millennium, and with Hasbro’s objectives of becoming a “branded play company” as a driver, these vehicles for worldbuilding have been progressively advanced and completed with new ones.

Having made sure that hardly any unfortunate gaps have appeared in the Transformers genealogy, Hasbro has ensured the brand’s durability for more than 25 years. New figures and concepts have been launched on a more or less regular basis, at the same time as established toys have been reworked and reimagined. Television programming and comic book series have contributed to maintaining the fans’ interest by establishing a continuous story, while these media have also been strategically employed to allure new generations of chil-
children to the franchise by delivering “new beginnings” story-wise. All sorts of merchandise and licensing deals have likewise contributed to the brand’s growth and expansion across platforms, including computer and video games, music albums, clothing, candy, interior, novels, and much more.

More than anything though, it was the release of the three Hollywood films, in 2007, 2009 and 2011, that significantly expanded the boundaries of the Transformers world. As indicated earlier, to some extent, it is possible to estimate the importance given to specific Hasbro brands by studying the covers of the company’s annual reports. The 2007 cover, when compared to earlier versions, can indeed be taken as evidence of the Transformers brand’s new position within the toy company’s brand library – a position which is explicitly attributed to the first Hollywood film (see figures 7.1 and 7.2 above).

This enhanced position is also understandable when we consider the financial importance of the first live action film to the interested parties. As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, whereas Hasbro did not get a percentage of the gross sales of theatre tickets, the company did observe an impact of the film on their product sales. While the direct impact of the film on the toy sales is hard to specify, Hasbro themselves were obviously pleased to find that 3 million units of Transformers goods were sold in a little more than a two-week period.
immediately after the film had been released, as the company’s CEO Alfreda Verrecchia concluded that that figure “exceeded our expectations” (Kavilanz, 2007, July 23). For the studios, the financial impact of the film was equally evident and, admittedly, more easily measurable given the more direct revenue streams. Partly due to the *Transformers*’ premiere, 2007 was a good year for Paramount Pictures and the company reclaimed its position as the leader in domestic box office, with a market share of 15.5 percent (Viacom Inc., 2008, February 20; DiOrio, 2008, April 22). According to the company’s own financial figures and statements, sales rose 57 percent to $1.3 billion on the strength of *Transformers*. And, indeed, the film did break several sales records, both as a theatrical and a home entertainment product.²⁶

Within parts of the fandom, as the next chapter will also make clear, the hitherto released live action *Transformers* films are considered to have opened up a new movie verse within the larger fictional universe. The live action films added new characters and storylines to the *Transformers* lore, while, at the same time, already established narrative elements were described in new ways. The subsequent sections will provide more details about the various components which, along with the film itself, served as “nodes” within the 2007 movie verse. Before arriving at this, however, I want to account for one, perhaps delicate, “problem” that came with the establishment of this movie verse, and that was discussed within the course of my interviews with professionals, namely the question of how to handle the significantly broadened spectrum of potential consumers. As noted by, for example, Carlos A. Scolari (2009) and Henry Jenkins (cf. 2006a), transmedial worlds of entertainment tend to attract a wide range of consumer groups, and the *Transformers* world seems to make no exception; especially not since the forming of the 2007 movie verse.

What the first of the live action films did, to a larger extent than any other previous *Transformers* commodity, was to present the brand to the mainstream audience. With the lavished film adventure, directed by Michel Bay and produced by Steven Spielberg for Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks, the brand’s status as a noteworthy popular culture phenomenon no doubt augmented. The records include: the largest gross ever for a Fourth of July premiere (Gilmore, 2007, July 6); the best seven-day showing for a non-sequel in history (McClintock, 2007, July 8); the biggest ever domestic opening for both Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks for a live action title (McClintock, 2007, July 8); the fastest and best-selling DVD/HD DVD of the year (with 8.3 million copies sold in the first week out and 4.5 million on the first day) (Garrett, 2007, Oct 22); and the top-selling October DVD release in the history of the home entertainment industry (Comingsoon, 2007, Oct 23). On theatres internationally, the film performed best in Russia, with a launch of $8.3 million. It also grossed big in Korea ($7.9 million), Spain ($5.2 million) and Australia ($3.8 million) (McNary, 2007, July 8).

²⁶ The records include: the largest gross ever for a Fourth of July premiere (Gilmore, 2007, July 6); the best seven-day showing for a non-sequel in history (McClintock, 2007, July 8); the biggest ever domestic opening for both Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks for a live action title (McClintock, 2007, July 8); the fastest and best-selling DVD/HD DVD of the year (with 8.3 million copies sold in the first week out and 4.5 million on the first day) (Garrett, 2007, Oct 22); and the top-selling October DVD release in the history of the home entertainment industry (Comingsoon, 2007, Oct 23). On theatres internationally, the film performed best in Russia, with a launch of $8.3 million. It also grossed big in Korea ($7.9 million), Spain ($5.2 million) and Australia ($3.8 million) (McNary, 2007, July 8).
massive bulk of mainstream press coverage that came with the film gives witness to this, as do accounts on behalf of people involved with the marketing of the brand. Both UIP’s Mats Jegéus and Hasbro Nordic’s Hans-Christian Ulrich confirm the image (established with the annual reports also) of Transformers as a brand that since the arrival of the 2007 live action film extends well beyond the children’s segment.

As observed by Jegéus during our interviews, the film marketing material provided by Paramount Pictures reflected a will to target a broad audience, as did the mere number of marketing channels utilized to advertise the film. As he explains though, marketing a toy-based film to 15 to 34 year-olds (who represented UIP’s core target group for the 2007 Transformers film) constituted a challenge. The film distributors had to be careful not to target too young audiences in the film advertising, since the film was rated PG13. For Hasbro on the other hand, children aged four to ten years old remained the main target group for the Transformers toys, as remarked by Ulrich.

The different age target groups did not prevent the film distributor and the toy company to benefit from each other’s efforts within the context of the 2007 film, however. As voiced by Ulrich, Hasbro Nordic had “a very good cooperation with UIP”, and his overall impression is that the film had a positive impact on the Transformers brand awareness. Without having any actual – in the words of Ulrich – “research” to compare with at the time of our interview, which took place roughly six months after the film’s theatrical debut, he describes how the situation presumably changed with the film: “I think the awareness of Transformers is so much bigger now, due to the fact that… I mean, before the movie I would consider the boys that were into Transformers… I would not call them nerds but they were more dedicated, because Transformers was still a niche to some extent”. Hence, according to Ulrich, the film contributed to moving the brand from a “niche” status to something of concern to less “dedicated” audiences also. Literally echoing the rhetoric from the annual reports, Ulrich further explains that with the arrival of the 2007 film, the company’s ambition was “to offer every boy, in every age, every level of Transformers”. In close relation to this, he also elaborates upon the dilemma of having two separate target groups for the Transformers film and the toys with the following reflection:

[…] I think it’s actually good that we expand the universe – because it is needed. […] I don’t think that any boys aged five or six years old have seen the movie. But they still think that the content is very exciting. That’s the funny part of it! And you can see the same in Star Wars and you can see the same in Spiderman. These movies are created for, let’s say, young adults and upwards, but it’s actually, I mean, it’s very inspirational for the small kids. So, they know what’s going on.
Thus, as suggested by Ulrich, the film created awareness among young children too, even though they were not actually allowed to attend the theatres to see the film. As further noted, this synergistic cross-fertilizing between media content and toys created a peculiar yet beneficial situation, in which the boundaries between different target groups became blurred:

[...]

... it is funny to see that, and it’s a bit weird actually, to be in this situation where we create products for kids four to nine, and then we also have some stuff for the collectors, but our primary target group is boys from four to nine. And then you create a movie for kids plus ten or... and it works. And the same goes for Spiderman, [and the] same goes for Star Wars. And that's actually also where you see... where we actually are happy that you create, that Activision also create, PS2 games and so on. Because that is something that we know they will play, the smaller kids also. And that's also some of the way of getting the boys involved in the brand.

Indeed, this quote reminds us of Jenkins’ central acknowledgment that “Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole” (2006a, p. 98), as well as of Jonathan Gray’s (2010) arguments about the functions of paratexts as textual beginnings. The benefits of being involved with a brand that transcends product categories, and thereby also target groups, are also recognized by interviewed Anders Wistam, at Activision Blizzard’s Nordic AB. As he says, such a brand affords valuable cross-promotions to be worked-out by the companies involved and the generating of as “broad a marketing arsenal as possible”. The 2007 movie verse did become cared for by a range of different actors – placed both inside and outside of the traditional entertainment industries – and was accordingly backed by extensive marketing. As things were, the film was supported by numerous campaigns, as well as a range of more or less related spin-off commodities. As an inescapable result of this, the movie verse formed a complex “web” of textually linked components.

7.4 *Transformers* as ‘commercial intertext’: The 2007 film and “related” commodities

This section will provide additional details in regard to how this web was actually constructed; that is, how *Transformers* became created as a commercial intertext (Meehan, 1991) at a specific period of time. Doing this, the section will provide a useful framework, not only to my accounts of specific marketing initiatives at the end of this chapter, but also to the fan productivity that will be the focus of the next chapter.

As noted earlier, processes of spatialization and commodification can be claimed to be at the heart of transmedial brand worlds which, essentially, are driven by product diversification (Mosco, 1996). The sections above reveal an interest on the part of Hasbro to turn the film narrative and characters into
other saleable products, and vice versa. Content “streamed” (Murray, 2003; 2005) from one platform to another, generating both transmedia storytelling and what could be understood as “transmedia marketing”. *Transformers*, thus, was ultimately launched to the consumers as an ‘immersive brand experience’ that developed across multiple platforms. In the end, what Hasbro and the film makers managed to create was a complex network of textual components which, through varying levels of sophistication, were interwoven.

Finding an appropriate structure to account for the maze of commodities and promotion that came with the first *Transformers* film is not easy, however. Ultimately, the *Transformers* cases make evident what has been stressed in the theoretical parts of this thesis: that the components making up today’s brand worlds cannot be neatly organized into categories such as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’, ‘main’ or ‘ancillary’, or ‘promotional’ or ‘non-promotional’ (cf. Kinder, 1991; Wernick, 1991; Pecora, 1998; Jansson, 2002; Marshall, 2002; Gray, 2010). The theory of paratextuality, especially, indicates the difficulties involved with making such categorizations. To recapture the arguments presented by Gray (2010), all textual elements may take on paratextual functions, which is why we must not make the mistake of thinking about paratexts as a special “type” of texts. Rather, we should recognize that all components caught up in a franchise’s ‘intertextual matrix’ (Marshall, 2002, p. 69) may work both promotionally and as frameworks of interpretation in relation to one another. As indicated, the companies involved in the making of the 2007 brand environment aimed at dissolving product category distinctions by allowing promotional material to address multiple brand divisions concurrently, that is, to create cross-promotional synergy.

Thus, if we apply the theory of paratextuality fully, we should label every textual component constituting the *Transformers* brand world ‘paratexts’. However, as crucial as it is that we recognize these circumstances, it would arguably be the case that the components of the 2007 movie verse had different weight in terms of significance. Indeed, as Gray too explains, “paratexts will exist on a sliding scale of importance and prominence” (2010, p. 175). While likely to vary depending on whom is asked, certain textual components were thus, or so I would suggest, more necessary for the formation of this brand environment than others. From a producers’ perspective at least – which is what this chapter is interested in – the film, toys, comic books, cartoon, and other price-tagged consumer commodities would arguably constitute the kingpins of the whole film franchise. Although marketers worked hard to attract consumers to promotional websites, trailer-screenings, contests, etc., the main goal would have
been to sell the commodities that these ‘paratexts’ served to promote. Again, recognizing this should not prevent us from recognizing also that promotional material may be treated with great interest and excitement by fans (indeed, as the next chapter will show, promotional paratexts may even come across as significant ‘franchise events’ to the fan base).

Before taking a look at how the brand environment created around the 2007 Transformers film was structured, I should elaborate my definition of ‘text’ as briefly presented in the introductory chapter. The fact that the term tends to be used in association with a range of subcategorizing labels (such as ‘primary’, ‘secondary’, ‘tertiary’, ‘meta’, etc.) in the existing literature on commercial intertexts, implies that it avoids simple definition. In relation to my object of study, it can be understood in two main ways. Either ‘text’ is taken to refer to the “ur-text” per se, that is, the overriding narrative universe to which all involved textual components can be connected – a use implied or made explicit in the works of, for example, Gray (2010), and Hills (2002) and Jenkins (1992b). Or, ‘text’ is used to refer to the specific textual components, such as a film, TV-show, book, toy, an advertisement, etc. comprising the narrative universe. In media studies at large, the latter meaning of the term would arguably be prevailing, and it does appear in the literature reviewed for this thesis as well (Sandvoss (2011), for example, distinguishes between ‘source texts’ and ‘paratexts’ in his account of fan productivity).

However, when employing the theory of paratextuality, this second use of the text-term becomes problematic, and Gray explains why: “To use the word ‘text’ in such a manner suggests that the film or program is the entire text, and/or than it completes the text” (2010, p. 6f). According to the theory of paratextuality, we should acknowledge instead that a film or a program is but parts of the text. After all, texts are created through paratexts, as Gray also shows. Thus, in line with Gray then, I reserve the ‘text’-label for the Transformers story-world, and when I wish to speak about the film, the toys, or other signifying systems within this world with one word, I refer to these as “textual components”.

One could perhaps argue that, as a consequence of this use of the ‘text’-term, it would be more appropriate to employ the notion of “intra-textuality” before “inter-textuality”. After all, the textual connections that I point to in this thesis are mainly connections that occur within the Transformers story-world, rather than between this text and others (although connections of that sort is also mentioned). Two main reasons exist, however, for why I here use the notion of intertextuality instead of intratextuality. Firstly, in the literature on ‘commercial intertexts’, intertextuality is the established notion to describe also the intra-textual linkages. Secondly – and even more importantly – the notion of intra-textuality can be claimed to be embedded in the notion of paratextuality, which, no doubt, deals with the connections between the inner “textual components” of texts.
From a producers’ perspective then, how might we understand the brand environment created around the first live action *Transformers* film? The figure below represents one attempt to capture the hopelessly nebulous “web of promotion” (Wernick, 1991) that constituted the 2007 movie verse. As evident, while with a large amount of respect to mentioned complexities, I choose here to make a basic distinction between the key commodities and the key marketing components comprising this brand environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Key commodities</strong> (including tie-ins and merchandise)</th>
<th><strong>Key marketing components</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theatrical film</td>
<td>Trailer videos, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD/Blue-ray</td>
<td>Announcement trailer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toylines, including</td>
<td>Teaser trailer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: Movie Toys</em></td>
<td>Full-length trailer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games, including</td>
<td>TV—commercials, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Game (Xbox)</em></td>
<td>those initiated by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Game (PlayStation)</em></td>
<td>Paramount Pictures &amp; DreamWorks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Game (Nintendo)</em></td>
<td>Burger King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Game (PC)</em></td>
<td>Pepsi Mountain Dew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Game (PlayStation)</em></td>
<td>General Motors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comics/Books, including</td>
<td>Film posters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers Movie Prequel</em></td>
<td>Printed advertisements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers Movie Adaptation</em></td>
<td>In-store advertising, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Movie Storybook</em></td>
<td>Toys R’ Us displays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: Official Movie Sequel</em></td>
<td>Out-door advertising, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Ultimate Guide</em></td>
<td>Street art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoons</td>
<td>Building wraps</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: Animated</em></td>
<td>Contests and sweepstakes, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: Prime</em></td>
<td>‘Fanaticom’ contest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albums</td>
<td>‘Make Optimus Prime Speak’ contest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Album</em></td>
<td>PR and publicity, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Transformers: The Score</em></td>
<td>TV—show appearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchandise, including</td>
<td>Behind-the-scenes programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional publishing</td>
<td>Awards, festivals and special premieres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparel</td>
<td>DVD/Blue ray bonus material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports items</td>
<td>Viral campaigns, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footwear</td>
<td>Sector Seven ARG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessories</td>
<td>Digital advertising, including</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>MSN campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanin</td>
<td>In-game advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stationary and paper products etc.</td>
<td>Promotional and cross-promotional websites*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Transformers.com (Hasbro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TransformersMovie.com</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TransformersGame.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TransformersAlbum.com</td>
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As any fan would likely discern, the above chart is not all-encompassing. Exactly due to the tremendously huge network of commodities as well as marketing efforts (as of May 5, 2008 there were over 250 licenses sold on the *Transformers* brand, as remarked by Hesselberg-Thomsen) – I have found it necessary to be brutal in my organizing and to provide examples rather than an all-inclusive list. What the figure does indicate, incomplete as it is, is how contemporary entertainment companies, and others, co-operate to create brand environments built up by an abundance of textual components for the consumers to explore and potentially purchase. Apart from all *Transformers*-labeled commodities, the 2007 movie verse also came to evolve around the brands of promotional partners, including, Burger King, Ebay, Foot Locker, General Motors, Lunchables, Pepsi Mountain Dew, Vespa, and Visa. Thus, as a consequence of cross-promotional efforts, the *Transformers* brand world came to be supported not only by paratexts created by Hasbro, the film studios, or equally involved entertainment companies, but also by those initiated by companies whose engagement with the brand are admitted more temporary (as the chapter continues, insights into some of these paratexts will be provided). This, in turn, yielded a complex textual structure that ultimately encouraged consumer mobility across platforms.

* Apart from the official websites connected to the 2007 film and related commodities, the websites presented here include those produced on behalf of the official partner companies to the film as well as those run by members of the film crew.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SectorSeven.org</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BuzzNet.com/Groups/StopSectorSeven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MySpace.com/Transformers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YahooMovies.com/Transformers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AutobotsRollOut.com (GM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ChevyAutobot.com (GM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TransformYourSummer.com (Pepsi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eBay.com/Transformers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vespa.com/Transformers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visa.com/Transformers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunchables.com/Transformers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target.com/Transformers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MichaelBay.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DonMurphy.net</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.3: Official building-bricks to the 2007 Transformers movie verse.
7.5 The making of ‘transmedia consumers’

Ultimately, every textual component connected to the 2007 film constituted a route into the Transformers franchise in general and into the movie verse in particular. As suggested also in relation to my account of Hasbro’s branding strategies, the delivering of content across multiple platforms can be viewed as an attempt on the part of the producers to create particularly loyal and active “transmedia consumers” (Scolari, 2009). My analyses of actual marketing content in relation to the film support this conclusion, and as indicated by other studies too, the concept of ‘active’ is increasingly used as a “strategic working notion” (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009, p. 383) by companies striving for consumer loyalty. But then, how was the 2007 movie verse built to actually encourage transmedial consumption? My analyses of one particular marketing campaign – the so called ‘Sector Seven’ experience – provide valuable clues as to how contemporary entertainment companies seek to “provoke fan interactions”, to speak with Jenkins (2006b, p. 145); yet in the sections leading up to this, I highlight three more or less distinct efforts by which the producers can be claimed to have turned the film into a potential transmedial experience. These efforts, crystallized from my study of the overall marketing campaign, consist in the use of recurring textual components; the creation of repeated and extended narratives; and the arrangement of spaces for play.

7.5.1 Recurring textual components

For transmedial consumption to be at all possible, the 2007 Transformers film needed to be but one component in an intertextual matrix, which, in the words of Marshall, “expands outwards through a series of linked cultural forms” (2002, p. 80). Of course, on an elementary level, all licensed products which are sold under the same brand name inevitably contain a great deal of textual linkages. Generally, they all wear the same logotype and are built of the same content. In the case of Transformers, the 2007 film formed a template for a range of licensed commodities and Hasbro developed products, which in turn were supported by huge amounts of likewise cross-referential paratexts. But then, apart from wearing the same brand name and logotype, the various commodities and paratexts within the 2007 movie verse were also intertextually connected through other means. Arguably, scrutiny of such connections allows us to understand how the rudiments of transmedial entertainment are established and how consumer activity is “provoked”.

The most obvious way to achieve linkages between the textual components of the 2007 Transformers film franchise, beyond brand names and logotypes, was
through the creation of different types of content “overflow” (Brooker, 2001) or “streaming” (Murray, 2003; 2005). Among other things, such a spillover of content was created through what McAllister and Giglio call “shared textual elements” (200, p. 116); that is, through the use of the same visual styles and sounds between the various components of particular brand environment. The “synergistic commodity flow” (McAllister & Giglio, 2009, p. 121) created through these and other recurring textual components can, in turn, be said to have both made possible and encouraged a flow of consumers across the various content platforms provided. But what, then, did these recurring textual components consist in?

To begin with, audio components from the film tended to reappear in many of the commodities and paratexts connected to it. Frequently used was, for example, a certain “transformation-sound” which played basically every time a Transformers robot changed from one mode to another in the film. The characteristic sound was, for example, re-used in the 2007 tie-in video-game, Transformers: The Game, as well as in many of the paratexts connected to the film, including trailers, TV-commercials, and several of the promotional websites created in support of the film. In a similar vein, the voices of specific characters in the film recurred in other narratives and paratexts. To many fans’ satisfaction, some of the voice actors from the 1986 animated film and the original TV-series returned to their roles in Michael Bay’s Transformers. Especially appreciated within the fandom are Peter Cullen and Frank Welker for their vocal interpretations of ‘Optimus Prime’ respectively ‘Megatron’, why it is perhaps not so surprising that their voices were utilized as a means to create a transmedial experience out of the film. Like the sound effects, the voices of these actors reappeared in the tie-in game as well as in various promotional paratexts.

Along with the recurring Transformers logotype and brand name, the utilization of the same sound effects and voices across several platforms would have contributed to a sense of coherence across the otherwise opaque mosaic of com-

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28 This sound effect came already with the first Transformers texts, such as the television series and the animated film, but in the 2007 film it had been updated from a rather mechanical, “boxy” noise to a more advanced, computerized sound.

29 For instance, when entering Hasbro’s Transformers site in time for the film’s release, it opened with a spoken line by ‘Optimus Prime’, alias Peter Cullen, saying ‘Autobots! Transform and roll out’ (a line which also connected to the older Transformers universe in which it had a central place). Moreover, in October 2006, the official film website announced a contest called ‘Make Optimus Prime Speak’, which brought the fans a chance to submit a line for ‘Optimus Prime’ to be spoken in the actual Transformers film. When the teaser trailer was uploaded on the website, in late December 2006, it had been enriched with the line that won the contest: ‘freedom is the right of all sentient beings’. In conjunction with this, the website was also updated to include the ten lines which had received most votes in the contest, all voiced by Peter Cullen.
modities and marketing found within the 2007 movie verse. This coherence, in turn, would have contributed to the cross-promotional potential of the textual components included, as well as enabled consumer recognition. Arguably, this coherence grew increasingly solid with the usage of the same visual styles across platforms. Importantly, mainly due to its live action and computer graphic mode, the 2007 film contrasts greatly with earlier, animated or drawn Transformers texts, in terms of visual aesthetics. What director Michael Bay did was to turn the cubic-looking robots from the 1980s and 1990s into gigantic, glossy and tremendously detailed dittos. Ultimately, as will be shown, the film aesthetics was transplanted into basically all related commodities and marketing paratexts, in more or less extensive ways. On order to exemplify such visual overflows, or the reuse of the film’s “looks” across the movie verse to speak with Wyatt (1994/2006), the links between the film and the film-based toyline constitute a fruitful starting-point.

The mere fact that Hasbro’s toyline came prior to the film’s theatrical release (they were sold from June 2, 2007) suggests that the toy company and film studios Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks collaborated closely in terms of character design. As revealed by many online forum threads, there were anxieties within the fandom regarding the challenge of making toys which, at the same time, resonated with the film’s advanced computer graphics and had play value. In addition to this, the companies also needed to adjust to the preferences of America’s biggest car company. The reason for this was one of the most extensive plot product placements of all times (Russell, 1998; see also Karrh, et al., 2003). With a number of characters presented as GM vehicles, and with the inclusion of still other GM cars in the film, this placement had critics refer to the 2007 Transformers film as “part car commercial” (Dargis, 2007, July 2). Hence, three main actors – Hasbro, the film companies and GM – would all have had an interest in the character/toy design. As even a hasty look at the toy packages would reveal, the car company should have been particularly pleased with the result of the co-operation.

If by nothing else, a “before and after” visual study of robot character ‘Bumblebee’ – central to the film plot and to the Transformers narrative universe in general – is illuminating. In the pre-Michael Bay Transformers stories, such as the TV-series, the comic books and the 1986 animated film, ‘Bumblebee’ disguised by transforming himself into a yellow Volkswagen, a so called ‘Beatle’ (see figure 7.4). In the early history of the franchise, this was also the robot’s alternate mode when appearing as a toy. With the 2007 film, however, ‘Bumblebee’ had his alternate mode significantly updated. In Bay’s film, the character did not
mutate into a yellow, mundane Volkswagen, but instead he took on the shape of a yellow, and eventually very well-polished, Chevrolet Camaro – of a model that General Motors would put on sale in 2009 (see figure 7.5). As indicated, Hasbro decided to adjust their toys to the film aesthetics.

Thus, the 2007 live action film had created a new ‘Bumblebee’ and within the movie verse the Chevrolet Camaro-version prevailed. Apart from in toy and packaging designs, Camaro-‘Bumblebee’ also reappeared in other textual co-

Figure 7.4: Before. In the classic Transformers texts and as a toy-action figure, ‘Bumblebee’ was a yellow Volkswagen.

Figure 7.5: After: In Michael Bay’s 2007 film, ‘Bumblebee’ changed into a yellow Chevrolet Camaro of 2009 year’s model. The new look of the classic character made it into Hasbro’s toy packages as well.
ponents, such as the tie-in video game, the film-based publications, and – of course, in much of the merchandise. As evidenced from the images below, he also figured as “poster boy” in toy stores (see figure 7.6).

Figure 7.6: From Hollywood to Toys R’ Us. The visual aesthetics from the 2007 film was reused in the marketing material connected to the film, for example in the in-store displays (photo provided by Hasbro Nordic, courtesy of Hasbro Nordic).
However, while ‘Bumblebee’ was updated to a brand new Camaro with the 2007 film, the Volkswagen did not completely disappear in the new movie verse. As a kind of homage to the long-term Transformers fans, a yellow Volkswagen was featured in one of the scenes in Michael Bay’s film.

Figure 7.8: A flirt with the past. When the film’s lead male character ‘Sam’ visits a car dealer to buy his first car, he ends up looking at the yellow Chevrolet Camaro which he eventually will come to know as ‘Bumblebee’. The bleached yellow Volkswagen placed next to the Camaro was recognized by fans as the “original” “Bumblebee”.

Figure 7.7: Enter the Transformers world. In Toys R Us-stores, the film-related Transformers toys were given spectacular display (photo provided by Hasbro Nordic, courtesy of Hasbro Nordic).
As an intertextual element, the Volkswagen inserted into the film should be understood as a bridge between the older and the newer *Transformers* universes and thereby as a means to create continuity across textual platforms. In a similar vein, a yellow Volkswagen was inserted into the official comic book prequel that was released prior to the film's theatrical debut in 2007, *Transformers: Movie Prequel*. Also, some of the toy packaging released in conjunction with the 2007 film contained both versions of 'Bumblebee': as Camaro and as Volkswagen. Hence, although the Chevrolet Camaro came to dominate as the robot character's alternate mode, connections to the older *Transformers* lore were still accomplished and would have served as intertextual frames among the long-term fans (Gray, 2010).

As the 'Bumblebee' case makes evident, the visual style from the live action film transferred to other related commodities as well as to the promotional material. Within the latter category, the various promotional websites which were launched to market the film and partner brands offer additional glimpses into the intertextual flows created between textual components in the context of the 2007 *Transformers* film. While it is not particularly surprising to find that the official film website, www.Transformers-Movie.com, was enriched with numerous references to the film, both audio-wise and visually, it is certainly fascinating to consider the extent to which the film's officially announced promotional partners, including General Motors, Burger King, Foot Lockers, Visa Signature, eBay, Lunchables, and Pepsi Mountain Dew, adjusted their online environments to the film's content.

In terms of commodity flows, General Motor's online co-branding efforts are worth extra highlighting. Not only did the car company provide the film makers with an impressive number of cars to feature in the film; they also launched a campaign called 'Transform Your Ride' (Graser, 2006, October 2). In early June, 2007, GM launched a new micro site which served to promote their vehicles in a *Transformers* context. The website was available at www.Autobots-RollOut.com (the URL-address refers to a classic ‘Optimus Prime’-line from the earlier *Transformers* narrative). As evident from the image below, the appearance of the GM website was heavily influenced by the film aesthetics and the “high-tech” look of the robots. Certainly, the website design itself connotated robots and science-fiction more than Detroit and car manufacturing, even though its content sophisticatedly managed to combine both aspects. At the top of the website, the GM logotype was placed right next to the *Transformers* ditto and the date of release for the motion picture. A click on the 'Bumblebee'/Camaro profile on the website connected the user to another GM-website.
that was launched to co-promote the *Transformers* film, [www.ChevyAutobot.com](http://www.ChevyAutobot.com) (see figure 7.9). Also this website was designed to cohere with the film aesthetics, and apart from providing more information about the various *Transformers* characters/car models, it also contained an online game which potentially extended the *Transformers* film experience further and allowed the users to play with the involved brands for a while.

![Figure 7.9: From Detroit to Hollywood. General Motor's Transformers-themed websites added even further dimensions to the promotional partnership between the car company and the film studios.](image)

In addition to these online “brandoms” (Guschwan, 2012), the car company also had the *Transformers* film influence five of its *TV*-spot commercials. The videos featured scenes from the actual film as well as footage of transforming GM cars, and the fact that film director Michael Bay was hired to produce them secured, in the words of Paramount Pictures’ senior vice president for worldwide marketing partnerships, LeeAnne Stables, that *the spots were in sync with the tone of the film* (Schiller, 2007, June 27). General Motors’ commercial spots, then, provide further insights into how textual components circulating around the time of the theatrical debut of the first live action *Transformers* film were strategically connected.

The GM case was not unique as an extensive co-branding effort. Other official partners too, like Pepsi Mountain Dew and Burger King, for example, took advantage of the film in their co-branding campaigns in similar ways as the car company. Textual markers from the film, both audio bites and visual styles, were thus repeated in the related commodities and marketing paratexts, which
in turn made possible an extension of the film experience beyond the cinema. Intertextual connections like these, I repeat, constitute the basic premises for transmedial consumption as they render different content platforms similar and thereby facilitate a flow of consumers (McAllister & Giglio, 2009).

With consideration to the function of brands as “quality marks” (cf. Ryan, 1992), it can be assumed that, for dedicated fans at least, the inclusion of recurring textual components (such as familiar voices or character profiles) across platforms (not to mention the mere inclusion of a Transformers logotype) would have been enough to lure them into transmedial consumption. Additionally, and as pointed out by Proffitt et al, companies count on fans to participate in “the flow of fan activity” (2007, p. 251) that contemporary entertainment companies aim to create. For others, though, further incitements might have been needed — such as the promise of transmedial stories.

7.5.2 Repeated and extended narratives

Indeed, connections between the film and related textual components were not only created through the reuse of sound-images and visual aesthetics, but also through narrative overspill. As held by Proffitt et al, the arrangement of “linked commodity narratives” (2007, p. 239) represents a new business model for entertainment companies, through which multiple revenues are created and synergistic effects achieved (see also Scolari, 2009). For consumers who wanted to have the Transformers film experience repeated through adaptations of the film’s content, or extended through “transmedia storytelling” (Long, 2007; see also e.g. Jenkins, 2006a; Littau, 2011), there were certainly a number of commodities and promotional paratexts to explore.

In the case of transmedia storytelling, which here is of special interest given its inherited trait to “push” consumers from one platform to another, both exclusive and inclusive forms were weaved into the 2007 movie verse. A rather exclusive kind of transmedia storytelling — equivalent to Dena’s notion of ‘transfiction’ (2006, January 6) — developed through the production of a series of comic books whose content, in various ways, connected to the film’s plot. Among these publications was the previously mentioned Transformers: The Movie Prequel, published by IDW Publishing (Furman, Ryall & Figueroa, 2007). This four-issue prequel was released on June 5, 2007, and built a background story to the events taking place in the live action film. Thus, almost exactly one month before the film’s theatrical debut, the consumers could prepare themselves by reading the prequel. For consumers wanting the storyline to continue after the film, there was also a comic book sequel to look into. Transformers: Official Movie
Sequel (with the subtitle ‘The Reign of Star Scream’) was released on May 2008, and it can be assumed that its main function was to keep up the consumers’ interest between the first film and the follow-up that was released in 2009 (Mowry, Milne & Perez, 2007). With the comic book prequel and sequel the consumers were thus given the possibility to create a true transmedial experience around the 2007 film, through which the story became extended and the characters’ personas deepened.

In important respects, the tie-in video game Transformers: The Game provided another, yet admittedly more inclusive, pathway – more equivalent to Jenkins’ (2006a) definition of the concept of transmedia storytelling – into such an extended film experience. After all, playing the game demanded no actual knowledge of the events developed in the film, although its elements would have appeared more meaningful with the film as a background reference. As players, the consumers were afforded to explore the Transformers world within the limits set up by the game design. Apart from allowing the player to act as one of the film characters and walk around in an open world environment to perform various missions which, to greater or lesser extents, were connected to the film plot, the game also hosted “bonus” material which became accessible when the missions had been completed, including trailers, production photos and alternative color schemes for some of the characters.

While the existence of transmedial storylines, such as those described above and others left out of this account, should be regarded as incitements for the consumers to buy related commodities, some of the promotional paratexts on offer within the 2007 movie verse developed their own versions of transmedia storytelling, or preferably perhaps, “transmedia marketing”. That paratexts can contribute to a narrative world by adding new dimensions to it has been recognized by Gray (2010) too. Such paratexts are, to repeat from what was told in my theoretical framework, referred to by Gray as textually incorporated paratexts (2010, p. 210ff). Arguably, the so called ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, which was one of the most sophisticated ingredients in the overall film marketing machinery, constitutes an excellent example of such paratexts. This, as the last sections of this chapter will elucidate, was a viral marketing campaign centered on one of the bearing plot components in the 2007 film, the fictive organization ‘Sector Seven’. It had as its point of departure a website, www.SectorSeven.org, but gradually flowed into other platforms as well. By linking together different paratexts – professionally produced as well as user-generated – and by telling the story of ‘Sector Seven’ across multiple platforms, the campaign indeed developed into
its own transmedial experience, while at the same time extending the film’s narrative into different directions.

Ultimately, through the sophisticated blend of promotion and extended stories, the campaign also came to constitute an arena on which consumers and fans could “hang out” with the Transformers brand for a longer period of time. As such, the campaign also constituted one out of many sanctioned playgrounds that were constructed in support of the Transformers 2007 film.

### 7.5.3 Spaces for play

It is not an understatement to say that the 2007 movie verse was rich in spaces in which consumers could play with the Transformers brand. Most notably, further incitements for consumers to engage in a transmedial film experience, next to those mentioned above, came in the shape of contests, games and gimmicks. Through activities like these, which essentially encouraged the consumers to stay and play within the Transformers brand world for a shorter or longer period of time, the producers would have aimed to breed not only brand awareness but also brand loyalty. Whether the activity consisted in a simple promotional online gimmick or a contest provoking consumers to send in their own user-generated content, the purpose would have been to keep the consumer engaged with the brand outside of the cinemas, and to follow the brand flow into still new directions. This section, then, provides some further insights into some of the spaces for play which were created in the context of the 2007 Transformers film.

Drawing on terminology derived from my theoretical framework, the contests and games can be said to have constituted “policing playgrounds” (Gray, 2010, p. 165) in which the consumers were expected, allowed and encouraged to play with the brand on conditions set up by the industry. In a high degree, these activities were situated in the online “brandoms” (Guschwan, 2012) created by Hasbro or its partner companies, which means that they ultimately made up “digital enclosures”; that is, interactive online spaces available only to those willing to commit themselves to specific rules and accept to be monitored (Andrejevic, 2007). The metadata which derived from these activities could potentially be exploited for commercial purposes, such as future, targeted advertising. The overall film marketing campaign included several contests, games and gimmicks, of various kinds and proportions, which invited the consumers to become either data or content providers, or, as in some cases, both (van Dijck, 2009). Sometimes, the activity also came with an explicit call to promote either the activity itself or the results of their engagement to friends.

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One such activity was the ‘Make Optimus Prime Speak’ contest on the official film website, which brought the consumers a chance to submit a line for the heroic Autobot-leader to be spoken in the actual film (cf. Seibertron, 2006, October 2). Being a contest, the activity asked for fans to register personal information along with their suggestion. Other gimmicks included on the official film website came in support of the *Transformers* DVD, which was released on October 16, 2007. One of these allowed the user to create a “personalized message” from hero robot ‘Optimus Prime’, voiced by Peter Cullen. Having provided requested information, the gimmick would generate a message read by the robot that could be sent to friends via either email or cell phone (cf. Tformers, 2007, October 8). A second feature afforded users to upload a photo of themselves and to “suit” themselves as a *Transformers* character. The fabricated photo could then be downloaded as an image or icon, and be passed on to friends (cf. Seibertron, 2007, October 7). Since both of these promotional activities included encouragements to send the results forward to peers, it must be assumed that they had a viral purpose.

Other activities, as mentioned, were arranged within the context of the many co-branding partnerships that the film project bred. Basically all of the film’s official partners offered at least one contest, game and/or gimmick for the consumers to engage in, and usually several. Retailer Target, for example, made an effort to promote the new film-related toyline by running a ‘Robo-Vision’ promotion. As mentioned earlier, the retailer sold its own “Target-exclusive” *Transformers* toys, and included in these toys were a ‘Robo-Vision Decoder’. With the help of this tool, which resembled a magnifying glass, the consumer could read otherwise invisible codes on the toy packages. On the Target website, www.target.com/transformers, there was also an online flash-version of the decoder that could be used to find codes hidden on the site. Except for on the toy packaging and the website, codes could also be found on the online or printed versions of two Target-sponsored movie prequel comic books (*Interlude* and *Planetfall*). With the help of the codes, the consumers were given access to “exclusive” material such as videos of *Transformers* commodities (toys, gift cards, etc.), toy images and blue prints, screen savers, IM icons, a trailer for *Transformers: The Game*, alternative “skins” for the game characters, and more (TF Wiki, 2011; Squidoo, 2011). No doubt, the intent of this particular promotion was to lure consumers into purchasing across Target’s assortment of *Transformers* commodities.

While many of the contests, games or gimmicks did not demand particularly high levels of consumer creativity, other activities were significantly different in
this respect. One such contest was ‘Fanaticon’, which was launched by Yahoo! Movies on March 26, 2007. With the inducement of a chance to meet with some of the producers behind the film, this contest asked the participants to prove themselves “the ultimate Transformers fan”. The instructions on the Yahoo website included the following instructions:

Maybe you have the entire collection of Transformers action figures in a climate-controlled case. Maybe you quote Optimus Prime in everyday conversation. Or maybe you and your friends like to act out scenes from the Transformers cartoons in suits made of aluminum foil and popsicle sticks. Whatever it is, film it and then submit your video here starting March 26. Our expert judges will review the videos and pick three true Fanaticons on May 14. (Yahoo, 2007)

Thus, the contestants were encouraged to make videos that would disclose how dedicated they were to the Transformers brand and have these videos sent in to Yahoo! Movies. The news about the contest spread across the fan communities, and obviously, the arrangers even asked the communities to help distribute the news. The following remarks were published on April 4, 2007, in a post about the contest on the unofficial blog Transformers Live Action Movie Blog:

In the interests of transparency, I was contacted by a representative of Yahoo to post; they simply asked, I said sure. I figured site readers would be interested. Besides once it did pop up on my radar I would have posted about it anyway, much like I did for the ‘Make Prime Speak’ contest. If anyone does enter, be sure to post about how it goes in the comments section. Go to the Fanaticon website for details, rules and how to enter.

On May 14, 2007, three winners, and their videos, were announced on the Yahoo website, which apart from details about the contest also featured graphics from the live action film, trailers and promotion for the film’s theatrical release. With regard to the winning videos’ particularly supportive contents, the contest can be regarded as a clever strategy by the companies involved with the 2007 film to have advertisements made for free by non-professionals, that is, by the fans themselves. Ultimately, the contest resulted in three more paratexts for the Transformers fans to explore while waiting for the film to be released. Needless to say, this and other activities mentioned so far accentuate the need to consider fan labor as a central factor behind transmedial world-building. Consequently, this aspect will be further discussed in my third and synthesizing results chapter and analyzed in relation to findings presented in my next chapter on Transformers as a site of consumer participation. As for now, I shall pay closer attention to one particular marketing campaign that provides further insights with a bearing on the subsequent discussion of the producer-consumer power relationship.
7.6 A case of ‘transmedia marketing’: The ‘Sector Seven’ experience

When it comes to consumer engagement and transmedial flows, certain elements within the overall film marketing machinery stood out in relation to others. One such element consisted in the viral marketing campaign earlier referred to as the ‘Sector Seven’ experience. Given the essentially ambiguous nature of this specific marketing campaign – which tended to blur the lines between types of content as well as the identities of the people participating in the experience – it represents a particularly illuminating case of transmedial entertainment in the era of media convergence, as well as of textually incorporated paratexts (Gray, 2010, p. 210ff). The subsequent sections present the results of the first part of a two-parted analysis of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience. These results are based on an analysis of the campaign’s actual content and components, and seek to establish what the campaign actually consisted in.30 While a close-reading like this leaves a good picture of the form that contemporary transmedial entertainment may take, on a textual level, it says little about how fans or other consumers may turn such entertainment into an experience. In the next chapter on fan participation in Transformers, I thus present the results of the second part of my analysis of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, by which I have sought to understand how the campaign was received, interpreted, and ultimately elaborated on by Transformers fans. Importantly, as the results of both parts of the analysis are discussed together, the theoretical implications of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience can be more readily evaluated.

7.6.1 A promotion – or a game?

The ‘Sector Seven’ campaign took as its point of departure the official teaser trailer that was launched in December 2006 to promote the upcoming Trans-

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30 The focus in my analysis of the actual campaign has been kept on the SectorSeven.org website since this must be regarded the key platform for the overall promotion/game experience. As is mentioned also below, this website changed over time, which means that the first version of the site (uploaded in December 2006) was different from the last version, which appeared in July 2007. This circumstance could of course make up a potential obstacle for anyone attempting to describe and analyze the website’s content and attributes. However, since the website mainly changed by having things added to it, my analyses departed from the latest version of the website, which came with the release of the Transformers film. With the right password, this version of the website could still be accessed at the time for my writing, which of course made my analytical procedures more convenient. It should be noticed in addition that my own documentation from earlier versions of the website along with fans’ accounts of content updates has reminded me of the website’s changing nature throughout the analytical process.

Although the point of departure for my analysis has been the SectorSeven.org website, the fact that the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery almost seamlessly floated into other promotional/storytelling platforms forced my analysis to extend beyond this particular platform – to other online spaces as well as to offline environments. Among the related elements were, for instance, correlating websites (professionally produced and fan-made), an extensive PR-tour, a virtual press conference, an outdoor advertising event, and various types of promotional material for the film (such as film poster and TV-spots).
formers film. Through this short video, observant Transformers fans became aware of a new website, called SectorSeven.org (see figure 7.10 on p. 187). In the teaser video, the name of the website and a password flashed by in one of the short scenes. With the help of these clues, the fans were given access to a futuristic-looking website with cryptic content to explore. With little more than a few icons to click, some mysterious data tracks running in smaller windows on the screen, and a background mainly painted in faded colors, the website connotated something secret, mysterious and perhaps even dangerous. The entire look of the website stated that it was “forbidden territory”. Indeed, the need of a password to even enter the site contributed to its enigmatic appearance.

Already from the start, the website caused speculation within the online fandom. As apparent from news posts and comments on fan communities, many were unsure about how to actually interpret the website. What exactly was it, and what was its purpose? While the website per se almost immediately became understood as part of the overall film marketing campaign, its content also had a clear storytelling function. With more and more possibilities to fan participation, the website became part of what would gradually develop into what could well be perceived as an enthralling alternate reality game (ARG). Piece by piece, the website laid out a narrative background to the future film and thereby added new dimensions to the entire Transformers fiction. Likewise, it made use of other promotional/storytelling elements to help build the promotion/game experience. Thus, through a sophisticated blend of advertising messages and transmedia storytelling, the ‘Sector Seven’ promotion/game truly blurred the lines between marketing and entertainment. In the end, it enabled what Hasbro’s Brian Goldner would probably have called “an immersive brand experience”.

As hinted in the introduction above, the followers of the promotion/game were constantly encouraged to explore other areas of the Transformers world in order to create the transmedial experience. As held by Jenkins, “transmedia promotion presumes a more active spectator who can and will follow [...] media flows” (2006b, p. 147). “Such marketing initiatives”, he continues, “promote a sense of affiliation with and immersion in fictional worlds” (2006b, p. 147). While a fan could possibly get much out of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign without investing a great deal of time and energy, the doors were definitely open for those who wanted to devote themselves to the experience. To fully enjoy the ‘Sector Seven’ promotion/game, consumers were encouraged to become particularly active and to interact with other consumers as well as the professional producers behind the campaign. As a consequence, the borders between the fans and the professionals occasionally became blurred to the extent that the
former group, at least, had difficulties deciding where some of the ‘Sector Seven’ content actually came from.

7.6.2 Premises: The ‘Sector Seven’ story

Due to the website’s storytelling function and role as an ARG platform, the contents on SectorSeven.org would no doubt have appeared confusing and mysterious for anyone unaware of the story around the fictional organization called ‘Sector Seven’. This is a story, partially told in earlier Transformers narratives, that was especially developed through the website and succeeding (para-)texts (especially through the film itself and the comic book prequel to the film). Therefore, in order to understand the content of SectorSeven.org, and the premises for my analysis, it is necessary to mention at least the rudiments of the fictional storyworld in which the website and its content were situated.

According to the Transformers lore, ‘Sector Seven’ is a top secret American government agency, whose main mission is to conceal from the public the fact that alien life forms exist. More specifically, the organization is set to allure people into believing that the Earth is not under threat by so-called ‘Non-Biological Entities’, or ‘NBEs’ as they are commonly referred to, although the organization itself has plenty of evidence that such alien life forms in fact are endangering the entire human civilization. In order to disguise the true existence of aliens, the ‘Sector Seven’ organization decides to run a “disinformation” campaign, called ‘Operation Hungry Dragon 2’, with the purpose of making the NBEs appear as purely fictional. The campaign involves the making of a live action Hollywood film in which the NBEs are referred to as ‘Transformers’ and the running of an extensive film marketing campaign to complete the propaganda. Thus, according to the story on which the ‘Sector Seven’ experience was built, the Transformers film from 2007 and the surrounding marketing efforts were initiated by the ‘Sector Seven’ organization as nothing but “cover-up” for the existence of “real” NBEs/Transformers.

Again, this is a story that developed on SectorSeven.org, and the different versions of the website were to be understood as “remote clients” to a handful of people working for the Sector Seven organization. The user, then, would be something of a trespasser or hacker, illegally acquiring access to a site that ordinary people were not supposed to know of, and certainly not use. The reason that the users could gain access to the top secret website was, according to the story, a character called ‘Agent X’ – a skilled hacker and the organization’s chief enemy (notwithstanding the ‘NBEs’ themselves, that is). In addition, the content of the website made known that the organization leaked from inside,
through a righteous scientist and weapon engineer called ‘Dr. Rebecca Howard’. Fighting against these truth-seekers were first and foremost ‘Agents Alexander Powers’ and ‘Agent Simmons’, both highly loyal and dedicated to the ‘Sector Seven’ mission. Teamed up with these men was also a character presented as ‘Agent Gravesen’. These and other characters were introduced and developed in the material delivered on SectorSeven.org.

7.6.3 ‘Imaginative anticipation’ as strategic notion

When the final password was revealed, in early June 2007, the website had basically all of its content in place. At that point in time, a mix of videos, images, audio files, e-mails and PDF-documents was employed to develop the ‘Sector Seven’ story and the campaign built around it. Generally, the contents of these various components could only be sufficiently understood when placed in relation to each other. With no guidance offered as to where to begin one’s exploration of the website or where to end it, much of the information found within these components made little sense initially and demanded an active user to be made meaningful. In addition to its obscure appearance, the content on the website also changed over time. On a more or less regular basis, and with increased intensity towards the end of the campaign, the website was enriched with new pieces of information. When bigger updates had been made, new passwords were demanded to enter the website and in total, eight passwords were delivered while the website was still active (see section 7.6.5 below).

Figure 7.10: At the heart of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience. The image shows the mysterious and fantasy-evoking SectorSeven.org website as it appeared in the final phase of the campaign. The “hard-drives” in the upper left and right corners, and the symbols at the bottom of the webpage, hid various types of contents, including videos, podcasts, “secret” documents, photos, and emails.
As will be further discussed in a later chapter (see chapter 9, ‘Assessing the issue of power’), the campaign design ultimately rendered it a site where the producers’ control over time – and thereby also space – becomes especially manifest. For, much like the Transformers brand world at large, the campaign in general and the main website in particular constituted a space that expanded over time. Arguably and essentially, it can be claimed that it employed Campbell’s (2005) idea of ‘imaginative anticipation’ as a strategic notion. Probably convinced that retaining participant interest would require continual change, the producers let the campaign go through a gradual growth by adding novelties to it piece by piece. Thus, while campaign participants were “free” in their exploration of the SectorSeven.org website in the sense of not being directed to one particular starting point, their agency was heavily circumscribed by the producers’ control over the release of new content and thereby also over what new spaces would become available for the participants to discover. The implications of this circumstance on the producer-consumer relationship will be further discussed in this thesis, but first, a closer inquiry into the contents of the campaign’s main website is in place.

7.6.4 Contents: Ambiguities on the ‘SectorSeven.org’ website

Contributing to the campaign’s indefinite nature was not only its free-floating structure, but also the fact that it comprised textual elements which tended to diffuse the boundaries between different entities; most importantly in respect to contents, environments, time-lines, and, ultimately, the identities of people involved with the campaign. Overall, the – in many respects liquid, “postmodern” – campaign came to be driven by ambiguities created in the dynamic fields that developed between binary poles. An attempt to label these admittedly cross-sectional and mutually reinforcing dynamic fields resulted in the following typology:

- The promotional – The non-promotional
- The real – The fictional
- The online – The offline
- The old – The new
- The professional – The amateur

1. The promotional – The non-promotional

Contemporary consumer culture has been recognized as a culture in which the blurring of boundaries between advertising and other types of content is particularly evident (cf. Kinder, 1991; Wernick, 1991; Jansson, 2002; Marshall, 2002).
Indeed, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign constitutes an exemplary model of such a convergence. As mentioned, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign immediately spurred a lot of pondering among users as to how to make sense of the content on the SectorSeven.org website. A significant cause of this confusion seems to have been the marketers’ achievement to place the campaign in the borderlines between the promotional and the non-promotional. On the one hand – and as the users seem to have come to terms with fairly soon – the entire campaign was provoked by the making of the 2007 Transformers film. In other words, the campaign owed its existence to this film, and anyone aware of its anticipated release would probably interpret the mysterious SectorSeven.org website as part of the film marketing campaign. Indeed, the inclusion of the URL-address and the first password in the teaser trailer – another significant element within the general film marketing campaign – can be assumed to have contributed to such interpretations. Beyond this, though, some of the content on the SectorSeven.org website was obviously promotional in itself.

Among the videos found on the website were, to begin with, four promotional videos advertising the 2007 film. One of these was a TV-spot containing scenes from the actual film. The remaining three consisted in three short clips, which appeared on the site in late June, 2007. These “viral” videos contained both humorous plots and advertising material for the upcoming Transformers film. They all ended with references to the official film website (with the encouragement to “View the full trailer at Transformersmovie.com”) and with the logos of Paramount Pictures, DreamWorks and Hasbro. Among the images found on the website was also a downloadable version of the international film poster. This poster was an attachment to one of the many emails (dated May 25, 2007) which eventually was displayed on the website. Also included in one of the emails were two music files, one of which contained the theme track for the 2007 film as recognized from the official film soundtrack, Transformers: The Album (Warner Bros.).

While all of these elements (the promotional videos, the film poster and the soundtrack theme song) could be accessed directly on the SectorSeven.org website and basically constituted embedded marketing material, the site also accommodated promotions of another kind. Most notably, this latter type of promotions pointed towards other components within the general film marketing campaign or within the Sector Seven campaign specifically. One component, to which several references were made on the SectorSeven.org website,
was the social media network site called *BuzzNet*. During the campaign, this site came to play an important role in the story about the fictive ‘Sector Seven’ organization. As mentioned earlier, according to the frame-story of the entire campaign there are people who have discovered the secret organization and their lies concerning the existence of NBEs, or *Transformers*, and who seek to reveal the truth about the organization as well as the existence of the aliens. During the marketing campaign, this “resistance” against the Sector Seven organization became embodied mainly a BuzzNet group called ‘Stop Sector Seven’ (see figure 7.11).

**Figure 7.11:** Additional campaign platforms. The ‘Stop Sector Seven’ group was introduced with the following words on the BuzzNet website (working also as intertextual connections to other science-fiction stories, such as Archive X): “The truth is all around us. But Sector Seven does everything it can to subvert, distort, and discredit. We must build a community of the knowing. We must shine a light on Sector Seven’s lies. Find the evidence and bring it here for all to see”. On the BuzzNet website, thus, users were encouraged to contribute with their own “evidence” for the existence of NBEs/Transformers – in the form of photos, videos and journals – and thereby fight against the Sector Seven propaganda.

Thus, along with the main campaign website, the BuzzNet community came to constitute an additional piece in the progressively complex ‘Sector Seven’ puzzle. In addition to this, the SectorSeven.org website included referents to the *Transformers* domain on another social network website, *MySpace.com*. This was done through the tenth podcast and more specifically through the following, rather overt, call to the campaign followers: “I’m afraid we’re losing the battle against

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31 *BuzzNet* is owned by Buzz Media and allows its members to partake in various communities focused on specific interests, particularly in celebrities and entertainment. Members of the site can upload and share photos, journals and videos with fellow users.
Sector Seven. […] We must target those who have fallen for their lies. Go to MySpace.com/Transformers. There are over one million people who need to know the truth”.

Yet another subtle promotional reference was made to the earlier mentioned Transformers: Movie Prequel comic book that was released before the film’s theatrical debut.

Hence, as illuminated by these and forthcoming examples of promotional content included on the SectorSeven.org website, the campaign took on a more or less evident promotional character – once one made the effort to explore the website’s actual content. Concurrently though, and as also indicated by the above account, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign departed from a fictional story, intriguing enough to make it more than an advertising platform for the 2007 film. For the users, it constituted a potential extended Transformers experience. Indeed, already the fact that the SectorSeven.org website had been given an “.org”-domain instead of the (in corporate marketing contexts) more conventional “.com”, can be taken as evidence for an ambition on behalf of the marketers to construct the campaign as non-commercial and thereby as something else than an “ordinary” film marketing campaign. In addition to this, the need of a password to enter the site made it differ from other promotional websites created within the context of the 2007 Transformers film. In terms of actual content on the website, narrative elements were given a central role and videos, podcasts and other elements contributed to the story development. Since many of these elements introduced some of the basic elements of the 2007 film’s actual plot, the SectorSeven.org website could well be read as a meaningful paratext to the Hollywood-adventure that was to come (Gray, 2010).

As stressed above, although the SectorSeven.org website included both obviously promotional and non-promotional content, it ultimately evaded any attempt to divide this content into clear-cut containers. Rather, the promotional and the non-promotional became elegantly blended, primarily because the marketers managed to integrate even the most obvious advertising with the overarching narrative. For example, the previously mentioned TV-spot found on the website was not simply “placed” on the website in an ad hoc manner. Rather, it was inserted into the Sector Seven mystery by being constructed as ‘Sector Seven’ propaganda, aimed at convincing the general public that the NBEs/Transformers were nothing but fictional. The same strategy was applied to basically every other promotional elements found on the SectorSeven.org website. The three promotional “viral” videos were inserted into the narrative framework by being announced as ‘Counter-Information Viral Spot’, and the film poster, similarly, was attached to an email with the heading ‘Operation
Hungry Dragon’. Thus, while the website did accommodate obvious marketing material, this material was nonetheless made meaningful within the context of the overarching story that developed inside and outside of the actual campaign. Speaking with Gray, these paratexts were smoothly textually incorporated (2010:210ff) into the overriding narrative. At the same time, of course, merely by underpinning a promotional campaign which in the end sought to hype the 2007 Transformers film, even the “purest” storytelling ingredients came to take on a promotional function.

2. The real – The fictional

Possibly contributing to the confusion of borders between the promotional and the non-promotional was the campaign designers’ inclination to have the entire campaign balance between the real and the fictional. Now of course, with the help of SectorSeven.org especially, the campaign took as its point of departure a completely fictional story, centered on the just as fictional Sector Seven organization, driven by equally fictive ‘agents’, fighting against no less fictive ‘activists’. To this, I am sure that even the most “immersed” campaign-followers would agree. Nonetheless, the campaign in general and SectorSeven.org in particular included elements which either were or were intended to look real. Again, as with the previously described dynamics between the promotional and the non-promotional (albeit here with the addition of the classic social problem of what is in fact “reality”), distinguishing between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional’ aspects of the Sector Seven experience was not an easy task.

By and large, the whole Sector Seven campaign was a mind-boggling experience. It created an “alternate reality” in which things were constructed to appear as something else than we might first have thought. Entering this fictive world, the users were expected play along with the idea that the 2007 Transformers film was nothing but a fraud to hide the existence of “real” alien life-forms and that the surrounding marketing material was only further “disinformation”. Then, how were the users expected to be “immersed” in this imaginative story?

Most obviously, the campaign flirted with authenticity. One of the earliest components added to the SectorSeven.org website, for example, was a PDF-document labeled ‘Takara Agreement’. This file, added in December 2006, included a lengthy, authentic-looking document that could be downloaded and printed. In the – for this campaign – typically cryptic manner, the seemingly type-written text laid out some of the basic premises for the Sector Seven mystery. It claimed to originate from 1983; the year in which Hasbro de facto made its agreement with Takara to take over the Transformers brand. In this version of
the agreement, however, the agreement is not between the two toy companies, but instead between Takara and the top secret ‘Sector Seven’ organization (‘S7 Industries’). Among other things, the document claimed to set the legal conditions for the making of “the ‘Picture’” (which would be the 2007 Transformers film) based on the “Transformers property”. While this particular component probably did not make much sense for anyone just having entered the website, together with the remaining contents it no doubt added authenticity to the experience. The same applies to many of the images found on the website – most notably the very real-looking photographs of demonstrating “Stop Sector Seven-activists” (see figures 7.12 and 7.13) – as well as to particular “voice recordings” of supposed ‘NBEs’ (more on the latter type of content under ‘The Old – The New’-section below). The inclusion of particularly real-looking “evidence videos”, shot with shaky hand cameras and featuring supposed UFO’s or ‘NBEs’, and the equally authentic-looking “surveillance videos”, would have added still more realism to the experience.

Figure 7.12 & 7.13: Adding authenticity. The ‘Sector Seven’ campaign developed its own narrative through authentic-looking contents, such as photographs and surveillance videos.

It can be assumed that the intent behind all of these and similar components was to enhance participant engagement. Indeed, with the development of a deep and rich story through the inclusion of various authenticity markers, such as those mentioned above, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign no doubt constituted more than conventional film marketing.

3. The online – The offline

As mentioned earlier, the ambiguities created within the context of the Sector Seven campaign tended to reinforce each other. As also suggested above, the difficulty of separating the promotional from the non-promotional can partly
be attributed to the challenge of sorting out the relationship between the real and the fictional within the contents of the campaign. Ultimately, within the narrative framework of the campaign, the “real” marketing campaign was constructed as “fictional” propaganda. By the same token, the blending of reality and fiction can partly be put in relation to the campaign’s trait of moving between online and offline environments.

As made evident, the SectorSeven.org website constituted the key “node” for the overall campaign. However, as the campaign progressed, other online platforms were made part of the experience too. The previously mentioned BuzzNet website constituted one such platform, as did various fan communities devoted to the experience (see the next chapter). Yet another online environment incorporated into the campaign was the virtual world known as Second Life.32

![Figure 7.14: Transformers in virtual reality. With a live press conference in Second Life, the Transformers experience became extended into the virtual world.](image)

On June 22, 2007, the avatars of film director Michael Bay, producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura and four of the actors from the film (Megan Fox, Shia Labeouf, Josh Duhammel and Tyrese Gibson) entered this world for a ‘Q&A’-session with a mixed audience of journalists, bloggers and fans. The conference continued for approximately 35 minutes and was also broadcasted on Second Life and

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32 For those unfamiliar with this phenomenon, Second Life was created in 2003 by the American company Linden Lab. As of November 20, 2007, it hosted over 11 million ‘residents’, as the users are called. In this virtual world, each user is represented by an avatar that can create and interact with other residents. On the homepage, www.secondlife.com, Second Life is described as “a free 3D virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create free voice and text chat”.

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on the web. As the conference ended, the film team and the other participants were encouraged to “enjoy Second Life”. And, for those who felt like it, there were certainly more *Transformers*-related experiences to partake in within the virtual world. With the press conference, the doors had also been pushed open for an area within Second Life called – yes – ‘Sector Seven’. In the press release sent out by Paramount Pictures International prior to the event, the following lines were included: “Explore the high-security ‘Sector 7’ underground facility featured in the movie and rebuilt within Second Life” and “Collect the first series of official *Transformers* avatars being given away free to ‘Sector 7’ visitors” (PR Newswire, 2007, June 21).

The fact that the ‘Sector Seven’ experience began online and developed chiefly through online videos, podcasts, email conversations, images, virtual worlds, etc. did not, however, prevent the campaign from extending into offline environments also. In one of the podcast recordings available through the SectorSeven.org website (no. 8), the users were informed by the “hacker” ‘Agent X’ that Sector Seven was organizing a campaign which would include the sending of “their own agents in the streets to spread more disinformation”. What this recording pointed at was ‘The Sector Seven Mobile Command Center Tour’. Within the narrative, this campaign aimed at bringing more propaganda to the people; in real-life, of course, it was an innovative PR-initiative aimed at generating awareness and hype around the upcoming *Transformers* film. The PR-campaign toured a selection of U.S. cities and invited people to enter one of the organization’s trailer trucks for previews of clips from the un-released film (cf. Seibertron, 2007, June 1). With the truck decorated like a spy van, signs demanding secrecy, and actors obviously playing underground “agents”, the tour would have constituted an immersive element of the overall promotion/game experience. Dates and locations for tour stops were advertised through emails and text messages to users who – either via SectorSeven.org or the BuzzNet website – had distributed their personal email addresses and/or mobile-phone numbers.

In addition to this extensive PR-tour, the Sector Seven campaign also came to incorporate another offline spectacle arranged within the context of the 2007 film marketing machinery. One of the videos on the SectorSeven.org website accommodated a clip called ‘Counter-information Blog Ad’. The video, which was uploaded to the site in June 2007, showed a skyscraper progressively covered in *Transformers* advertising. The unveiling of the “wrap” eventually became a media event as it, among other things, was broadcasted on radio (TFW2005, 2007, May 8). In the context of the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery, and like with the PR-tour, the whole thing was constructed as clever “disinformation” propaganda on behalf of the secret organization.
4. The old – The new

The prolongation of the campaign from online to offline environments certainly extended the ‘Sector Seven’ experience spatially. In addition to this, the campaign also played with the temporal by blending the old with the new. As in an attempt on behalf of the producers to both keep the long-term Transformers fans interested and to attract new audiences to the growing franchise, the campaign became saturated with references pointing forwards – to the 2007 film especially – as well as backwards – to earlier Transformers narratives.

Of course, being part of the overall film marketing arsenal, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign no doubt was primarily aimed at creating awareness and hype around a future Transformers commodity: the film. Apart from the obviously promotional material, such as the film poster, the TV-spot, the soundtrack theme song, or the viral videos, the SectorSeven.org website contained much forward-looking contents, including news about either extra-textual matters (such as cast of actors) or the film plot. Now, the website had its own way of delivering such news to the campaign participants. In particular, they were delivered via the email faction of the website and typically via cryptic messages which demanded considerable decoding skills to be made meaningful. Essentially, the email faction and the messages kept there were used as a means to “prepare the soil” for the live action film. Most notably, several messages, like many of the podcasts, served to introduce the users to the film’s basic plot. The email below (from March 1, 2007), for example, would have functioned as an introduction to the basic premises for the film plot, including the struggle between good and evil robots, the leadership of ‘Optimus Prime’ and the role of the humans in the adventure:

The life form you have contacted is not a hostile. I repeat NOT a hostile. He is one of the few that will come to defend us from the invaders. N.B.E. two’s true name is Optimus Prime. He was the co ruler of a world many light years from here. A war has broken out among his people. The world is now divided into two factions, Autobots and Decepticons. [...] I suggest you seek out and detain the descendant of Archibald Witwicky, Sam Witwicky, you will find that this boy is key to saving our planet from the Decepticons.

As a telling example too, this message, which appeared to have been written by a Transformers robot, in line with the framing story, can be taken as evidence of the campaign producers’ eagerness to speak both to long-term, knowledgeable fans and to new-comers to the Transformers fictional world. It expects its readers to be aware of the origin of the message (which can only really be obtained by following the campaign’s story development) and hints towards events in the upcoming film, yet at the same time finds it necessary to explain the basic premises of the Transformers lore (the division of robots into one good and one
evil faction and the role of ‘Optimus Prime’). Further hints on the 2007 film came in the form of content referring to the U.S. military’s rather prominent role in the film plot. The actual film does contain a sub-plot involving U.S. military activities in Iraq where they, among other things, are attacked by evil Transformers, and on the SectorSeven.org website this sub-plot is hinted at in several videos.

While the campaign as a whole was primarily launched to market the 2007 film to old and new audiences, it did make use of familiar Transformers elements to do so too. In terms of backward-looking referents to the pre-Hollywood Transformers lore, a few illuminating examples from the SectorSeven.org website will also be given. As mentioned briefly, the website contained voice recordings of supposed ‘NBEs’/Transformers. A click on the satellite-icon in the middle of the screen provided a tool called ‘Scanning for non-biological entities’, which could be regarded as something similar to a simple game. The tool allowed the user to decode cryptic messages from “space” with the help of a few clicks on the right places on a frequency graph. When doing this, the voices of two or more robots (‘Optimus Prime’ was one of them) were repeating statements famous from earlier Transformers texts, such as ‘One shall stand, one shall fall’, ‘We are here and we are waiting’, ‘Autobots, roll out!’. With no clues or instructions what so ever on how to access these hidden messages, the users were clearly expected to come to terms with the tool on their own – and to recognize the classic Transformers discourse.

In a similar vein, the campaign producers managed to insert a reference to older Transformers narrative elements which, as shown earlier in this chapter, tended to reappear in the overall marketing content: the yellow ‘Bumblebee’ Volkswagen. Again, while this particular robot had its alternate mode updated with the 2007 film (to a 2009 Chevrolet Camaro), the Volkswagen incarnation was never completely abandoned. As with the additional referents to the pre-Hollywood mode of ‘Bumblebee’ – including the parking-lot scene in the actual film – the showing of a Beetle Volkswagen within a Transformers narrative cannot be regarded as a coincidence but rather a flirt with the long-term fans. On the SectorSeven.org website, observant users would spot the Volkswagen in one of the “surveillance videos”, showing how the car arrives at a parking house, transforms itself into a robot, and steps all over another parked car (see figures 7.15 and 7.16).
Hence, through these and other references, the contents on SectorSeven.org can be said to have served as a bridge between the live action movie verse and previous *Transformers* narratives.

5. The professional – The amateur

Lastly – and arguably as a consequence of some of the matters discussed above – the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign worked by confusing the boundaries between the professional and the amateur. As already pointed out, the Sector Seven.org website had contents whose origins were not at all easy to determine. While some of the elements could quite clearly be read as professionally produced (albeit after closer scrutiny) the provenance of others remained a mystery throughout the campaign. What can be assumed is that the confusion of identities was a deliberate strategy on the part of the campaign producers to make the experience even more puzzling and engaging to the participants. Then, how was this perplexity achieved within the frames of the campaign? Some illuminating examples from the SectorSeven.org website provide insights into this.

To begin with, and as indicated above, one of the audio files on the website was hinted to be a fan-made song. This piece of music, called ‘Choose Your Side’, was presented and delivered with an email from the anonymous ‘Sector Seven’ loyalist to ‘Agent Simmons’. Included in the email (dated July 5, 2007) was the following message:

*Over the past few days, many “fans” have reacted to the final phase of our Hungry Dragon 2 campaign by creating their own disinformation content. Today we received the attached file entitled ‘Transformers (Choose Your Side)’. The creators call themselves “A-bex & Azeem”. Perhaps we can utilize them in the future if we need to enact Hungry Dragon 3. You’ll be pleased to hear that they used the lyrics you wrote for the first Hungry Dragon campaign. Enjoy!*
As evident from these words, it is implied that the song was created by “fans” within the framework of the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery. The role-playing messenger obviously acknowledged the value of having fans engaged in the so-called “disinformation” campaign, and in the adding of the fan-made song to the SectorSeven.org website it becomes obvious that the “real” film marketers did as well. Through the email attachment, this fan-production became one building brick in the story-development. In respect to the above section, it can also be noted that the song – like the email mentioned – included references to the “first Hungry Dragon campaign”; that is, to the 1984 Transformers franchise.

Another supposedly fan-made ingredient of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign consisted of a website; VectorSigma.org. The URL-address to this website, www.vector-sigma.org, was shown in one of the images found on the SectorSeven.org website. Like the official SectorSeven.org website, a password was demanded to open, and much of its contents reminded of or was identical to that found on SectorSeven.org. Among other things, Vector-Sigma.org included some of the podcasts from the official website, a TV-spot, surveillance videos, photos and emails. Given the website’s engagement with the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery, it can be regarded as an additional online platform for the campaign, as a complement to SectorSeven.org, the BuzzNet website, and Second Life. According to fan speculations, however, the website was not professionally produced, but rather the results of fan creativity. As a news post on May 20, 2007, on the ‘Transformers Live Action Movie Blog’ read, for instance: “Based on the info from the comments and confirmed comments elsewhere turns out vector-sigma.org is a fan creation. A very well-done fan creation, but not official part of the viral Sector S7 campaign. Shame though, very good idea of some potential there”. Thus, while the Vector-Sigma.org website was understood as an unofficial part of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, it was nonetheless made part of it the moment it was incorporated into the main campaign website. Ultimately, both the supposedly fan-made song and the Vector-Sigma.org website blurred the lines between the professionally produced and the amateur-made.

Further challenges to the users’ sense-making of the campaign’s content in terms of who was behind it, were offered by the email faction of SectorSeven.org. As told above, this part of the website accommodated content delivered by the campaign professionals as well as by campaign followers. Two of

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33 According to the fictional universe that developed through the animated television series, ‘Vector Sigma’ was a “super computer” that gave life to the first generation of Transformers.

34 Due to the unfortunate fact that the Vector-Sigma.org website had been closed down by the time I became aware of its existence, I have had to rely on secondary source information when presenting its contents and visual appearance (cf. Transformers Live Action Movie Blog, 2007, May 20).
the folders, ‘My email’ and ‘Snup’, contained emails which were rather obviously produced professionally to enhance the promotion/game experience. The contents of these folders were possibly intended to be perceived by the followers as top secret messages from actors primarily within the ‘Sector Seven’ organization (although some of the emails from “outsiders”, such as the mysterious rebel ‘Agent X’, also appeared here). That the emails included in these folders were professionally crafted to enrich the experience becomes apparent when one considers the information revealed in them. More than anything, these emails included news about the upcoming Transformers film and hints towards related promotional material (such as the film poster and the soundtrack theme song).

If the fans made themselves visible on the SectorSeven.org website already with the fan-made song and the Vector-Sigma.org website reference, they were even more noticeable in the third email folder, headed ‘Annoyances’. This folder contained 56 emails sent to security@sectorseven.org, or “S7 Department of Network Security” as it stated in the address field connected to the emails. Yet, who the senders of these messages actually were remains a mystery in some cases. Without disclaiming that many or even most of the emails in this section were actually sent by private persons participating in the promotion/game experience, the contents of some of the messages suggest that they, after all, were written by professionals “disguising” as fans. For instance, the details delivered in the following excerpts from two emails (dated April 7 and April 8, 2007, respectively and signed with the same signature, ‘Agent XX6’) makes it reasonable to assume that the messages were intended as allurements for fans hungry for details on the upcoming film. Apart from both emails pointing to characters and sub-plots included in the actual film, the first one evidently also strived to attract the readers to the BuzzNet website.

I fear that NBE 115 (codename Reflector) may be to blame. I recommend raising our security level and placing more guards on duty at Megaman’s hanger. I have a feeling Stop Sector Seven may be planning an offensive maneuver to free Megaman from his icy slumber. You can view more info here: http://www.buzznet.com/groups/stopsectorseven/forum/topics/10554/

I have discovered that NBE “Blackout” is planning to attack a United States Air Force base in Qatar in order to assimilate information from computers and deploying the NBE codename “Scorponk”.

While the actual fan-emails showed on the SectorSeven.org website most likely represented the result of a careful selection on behalf of the campaign producers, the disclosure of email addresses to the ‘Sector Seven’ organization did provide a “meeting spot” for both parties. The campaign producers clearly
wanted the followers to engage in the ‘Sector Seven’ experience by contributing their own emailed content as part of the role-playing. Many users also offered their assistance in the ‘Sector Seven’ case or expressed sympathy with the opposite side, the ‘Stop Sector Seven’ faction. These users generally claimed that they had “information” to offer the ‘Sector Seven’ ‘agents’, provided they got some information back in return. The following excerpts, from three different emails (dated February 5, February 10, and March 1, 2007, respectively), reveal how these proposals typically were articulated:

I have information regarding the whereabouts of Agent X. However, you’ll have to share some information with me first. Write back if you want to know more. Jacob

I have something for you in regards to Agent X. Contact me if you are willing to learn more.

I have information on the “Megaman” that you don’t currently have; his origins, purposes. I also know a great deal about his compatriots. If you are interested in this information, I suggest you contact me immediately.

Thus, users willing to play along in the ‘Sector Seven’ game asked for replies to their emails. While I cannot be sure as to whether these users actually received any answers or not (no such replies were presented on the website), fan discussion boards make known that fans signing up for the Stop Sector Seven group on BuzzNet did obtain emails from “hacker” ‘Agent X’. Allegedly, fan engagement resulted in more information about the promotion’s/game’s premises. One email sent out to participants of the campaign (dated April 5, 2007) was quite specific in regard to the fans’ anticipated contributions. Apart from more dedicated “crusaders” in the fight against ‘Sector Seven’, it asked the fans to engage by providing more of “videos”, “photos” and “eyewitness accounts” (implicitly to the BuzzNet-website). The following is an excerpt from this email:

Agents

[...] Now we must build on the foundation you’ve created. We need more. More evidence videos, photos, eyewitness accounts and more dedicated crusaders to help expose Sector Seven. We can’t win the information war if the public only listens to Sector Seven’s lies. Just look at all the money they’ve already put into this counter-information campaign. Hundreds of millions. We don’t have that kind of funding on our side. But we do have the truth, the will, and the technology to reach the entire free world. They may be able to silence the entire world. Sector Seven must be stopped. Spread the word.

Hence, either by sending emails to Sectorseven.org or by signing up on the BuzzNet-website, fans could get into “direct” contact with the fictional ‘agents’/campaign producers and receive more or less exclusive information about the promotion/game as well as on the film itself. The marketers, in turn, would have had access to the fans’ personal information and the chance to target them with rather personalized messages. Apart from making encourage-
ments to upload “evidence” on the BuzzNet-website and updates relevant to the experience, the fans were also provided with details about the PR-tour ‘The Sector Seven Mobile Command Center Unit’ through their cell phones (from ‘Agent X’). As mentioned above, the news about the release date of the full-length trailer on Yahoo was also delivered by a cell phone message.

To conclude this section, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign encouraged user activity of different kinds. The producers expected the followers to become devoted to the experience and patient enough to immerse themselves in the progressively complex and multiplatform mystery. The next chapter will bring more details on the “buzz” that was spurred by the campaign, but beyond this, the fans contributed with their own contents to the campaign. It is to be noted though, that while the users were invited to participate in the ‘Sector Seven’ experience by providing their own creations, it was nonetheless the professionals who controlled the design and maintenance of the campaign. It was they, not the users, who decided when updates should be made and contacts be taken. In other words, it was the professional producers who ultimately controlled what directions the mystery should take.

7.6.5 Flows: ‘Sector Seven’ as transmedial entertainment

As indicated by the accounts above of the content of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, this particular marketing initiative was designed to create consumer flows over different areas of the Transformers world. Through the fluid nature of the entire ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, the user experience ultimately came to depend upon the users’ readiness to move between textual platforms. Directly on the Sectorseven.org website or via links, the users would discover a growing body of promotional material to explore. The ‘Sector Seven’ puzzle could not be completely “solved” merely through the content added to the SectorSeven.org website but relied on other platforms to fill in the gaps, including social network websites as well as “real-life” role-play. In this sense then, the campaign was designed as a transmedia storytelling product, counting on the fans to “flow with the story” into both online spaces and offline environments. In addition to this, the campaign potentially encouraged temporal movements by making users aware of older as well as newer components of the Transformers brand world.

Contributing to the transmedial character of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience was also the play with passwords that continued throughout the campaign. As mentioned, the SectorSeven.org website could not be accessed without the, for currently, valid password, and in total eight different passwords were delivered throughout the campaign. As shown below, the disseminating of these pass-
words across the *Transformers* world can be read as yet another strategy by the producers to create consumer flows; that is, to foster transmedial consumption. Typically, all passwords were hidden inside commodities or paratexts connected to the 2007 film, including the so-called teaser trailer, a flash advertisement on the sports website ESPN.com, an email exclusively sent to the game participants, the *Transformers* MySpace-profile, a BuzzNet message, an image featured in the *Transformers: Movie Prequel* (IDW Publishing), the full-length trailer, and a texted message sent to promotion/game participants.

**Figures 7.17 & 7.18:** With an eye for details? Passwords needed to enter the SectorSeven.org website were hidden in other promotional material connected to the 2007 film. The top image shows the first password (takara83), inserted into the full-length Transformers trailer along with the URL to the website. The image below shows the sixth password (gravesen), featured in the fourth issue of the movie prequel comic book.
From the producers’ perspective, the hiding of passwords in a range of different contexts must be considered a clever strategy to create awareness of the upcoming *Transformers* film. It simultaneously relied upon and encouraged user loyalty and activity. Not only were users expected to return to SectorSeven.org with every newly discovered password to access new pieces of information, but they were also directed to other areas of the film marketing campaign and the surrounding *Transformers* universe. With the password-hunting, the fans could potentially be kept within the *Transformers* brand world for a longer period of time. Already the first contents of the ‘Sector Seven’ website hinted that passwords would be distributed online. In an email from March 5, 2007, for example, it was said that hacker ‘Agent X’ “has begun to disseminate […] security codes to the public via the Internet”. Likewise, in a related message, posted on March 26, 2007, it was revealed that there are “backdoor passwords” circulating online. Thus, the users were basically told to stay alert and keep their eyes open for these secret codes at an early stage of the campaign. Then, by hiding the passwords in other promotional contexts (for example in the teaser, the full-length trailer and the ESPN.com advertisement) or on sites more closely connected to SectorSeven.org (for example on BuzzNet.com), the producers created cross-promotional synergies by having the advertisements reinforce each other.

From the users’ perspective, the search for passwords can be regarded as an integral part of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience. It certainly brought new levels of sophistication to the campaign, and possibly also created a sense of exclusivity in that the contents on SectorSeven.org were not available to just anybody, but only to those who proved themselves to be truly committed to the game. Possibly, this effect was anticipated by the producers and would arguably have worked as incitement for participants to stay attentive to updates and changes.

Knowledge, as my theoretical framework has indicated and as my subsequent results chapters will indicate, is a highly evaluated currency within fandoms and an important means of establishing internal hierarchies amongst fans (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b, 2006a, 2006b; Baym, 1998; 2000). Once found however, and also in line with established fan theory, (cf. Fiske, 1992; Staiger, 2005; Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b), the fan communities were generally quick to circulate their wisdom concerning the codes and thereby made these available to those users who had not “accidently” stumbled upon them. For, even though the passwords were potentially available to all fans – albeit only after acquiring a particular commodity or the consumption of a specific advertisement – it is reasonable to assume that only a handful of fans discovered the password in their original contexts. Indeed, as suggested in the subsequent chapter, the collective
search for and the sharing of passwords seem to have been important activities for users engaged with the campaign. Ultimately, the fan talk came to take on a “collective intelligence” function as discussion boards and news posts tended to inform community members of currently valid passwords as well as general information about the whole ‘Sector Seven’ mystery. The possible implications of this and other mentioned traits of the campaign are made subject to further discussions ahead (see especially chapter 9, ‘Assessing the issue of power’).

7.7 The ‘Sector Seven’ experience part one: Concluding remarks

The five “ambivalences” discovered through my analysis of the campaign’s actual content can be assumed to have served – or to have been intended to serve – different functions. The sophisticated blurring of boundaries between the promotional and the non-promotional, could be read as a strategy by the producers to deliver commercial messages in an unconventional manner and, thus, to make the advertising appear more exciting, and perhaps also more valuable, than it would have if presented in a more traditional way. Instead of being “fed” with promotion, the users were encouraged to “dig out” the advertising themselves – all according to the traits ascribed the participatory consumer (Jenkins, 2006a). Possibly, the users were expected to develop increased tolerance of commercial messages textually incorporated (Gray, 2010, p. 210ff) in an absorbing story.

The dynamics between the real and the fictional, to continue, could be viewed as a strategy to present the Transformers brand to an older, more mature audience. Obviously, the entire campaign – demanding as it was to follow – was targeted towards an audience interested not just in the franchise toys but more so in the Transformers text at large. By adding layers of authenticity, the campaign producers possibly expected to reach audiences old enough for the 2007 film. Similarly, the play with online as well as offline environments could be read as an ambition on part of the producers to expand the narrative universe of Transformers, and certainly to “make the brand relevant” in all the more contexts (see Hasbro Inc., 2005, p. 5). The real-life PR-tour, the building wrapping, and the Second Life press conference became media events which possibly introduced the brand to new audiences. However, while presumably eager to find new audiences for the brand, the campaign still also included flirts with the long-term fans. By balancing between the old and the new, the campaign producers reinforced the brand’s continuity without running the risk of losing neither “old” nor “newer” audiences.
The confusion of identities, finally, could be interpreted as a clever way to create loyal followers – to the campaign *per se* as well as to the *Transformers* brand at large. By making the fans feel that their involvement really was important for the “outcome” of the mystery, the campaign encouraged the users to invest their time in it and play with the brand within the frames set up by the campaign organizers. References to actual user-generated content, such as the Vector-Sigma website, the fan-made song, and the fan emails, were possibly intended to function as “baits” for additional user engagement.

Ultimately, the campaign can be read as a symptom of contemporary entertainment industry practices as well as of media convergence at large, including the establishment of a ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006a) in which consumers were expected to contribute with their own user-generated content to complete the brand experience. My analysis of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience, thus, confirms previous observations, made by, for example, Jenkins (2006a), Dena (2006, January 6), Bolin (2007), Long (2007), Scolari (2009), Gray (2010) and Littau (2011), regarding the tendency of contemporary storyworlds to be delivered throughout a range of more or less closely incorporated platforms.

Essentially, the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery came to serve as a *pre-text* to the 2007 film by establishing characters and plots which would prove important to the film narrative. As such, the campaign must also, to speak with Gray (2010) be regarded as an interpretive framework that inevitably presented the users with clues as how to eventually understand the events played out in the film. In effect then, by serving both to “make present” and to “present” the film (Genette, 1997), the campaign can be claimed to have contributed to the making of the film experience. Indeed, by starting out already six months before the film’s theatrical debut, and continuing up until this event, the campaign constituted a space for play for the users to “hang out” in while *anticipating* the actual film release. The progressive filling of content on SectorSeven.org – by which pieces of information about the film’s plot and clues about the ‘Sector Seven’ puzzle were added in intervals – can be assumed to have intended to keep up consumer interest, and ultimately, reinforce it.

Above serving as a springboard into the film narrative, the campaign built its own mystery across platforms, meaning that each component came to contribute to the overall ‘Sector Seven’ story. Ultimately, the campaign can thus be claimed to have turned at least the most bearing storytelling platforms into what Proffitt et al have referred to as “narrative necessities” (2007, p. 239). The cryptic contents on SectorSeven.org in particular can be assumed to have encouraged the users to look for cues beyond this specific website. Thereby, it can also
be concluded that the campaign-design was based on the assumption that *Transformers* fans are willing to engage deeply with brand experiences and consume “transmedially”.

The ambiguities underpinning the entire campaign – the blurred boundaries between the *promotional* and *non-promotional*, *real* and *fictional*, *online* and *offline*, *old* and *new*, and *professional* and *amateur* – rendered it a particularly hard-gripped type of marketing, not easily identified as such. Most likely, it was precisely the puzzling nature of the campaign’s content that motivated consumers to engage with the experience. Ultimately, the campaign can be said to reflect a will on the part of the producers to “cultivate fan engagement” (2011, p. 13), by demanding particularly high degrees of consumer activity. Not only were the users expected to – as fans tend to do – read deeply into the mystery *per se*, they were also encouraged to – as fans also tend to do – create their own content and to share this with fellow users. The email faction of SectorSeven.org, for example, gives evidence of this, as do the social networking taking place on the BuzzNet website. Hence, expecting and encouraging the users to act both as content providers and data providers, the campaign ultimately relied upon *affective labor* (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293) to make the most sense. The users were not “merely” consuming the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery, but also helped produce it. User-generated content, or the results of fans’ textual productivity (Fiske, 1992; Sandvoss, 2011), was seamlessly incorporated into the campaign and users were encouraged to promote the campaign to peers. The supposedly fan-made song, the Vector-Sigma.org website, the BuzzNet ‘Stop Sector Seven Group’, and user emails were in the end parts of the promotional campaign.

Finally, the incorporation of different narratives and paratexts into one grand experience can be taken as evidence of the producers’ ambitions to create “personalised” (Bolin, 2010a) mass audiences. For each commodity and paratext included in the campaign there were audiences which, when added together, would have become an audience of scale. Indeed, the overall film marketing campaign seems to have been built around the idea that different components would attract different audiences. Admittedly, given the demanding mystery around which the campaign evolved and the cryptic manner in which clues were presented, the ‘Sector Seven’ experience must be considered to have been aimed at an audience sufficiently committed to the *Transformers* brand to devote time and energy to it.

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This chapter has provided insights into *Transformers* as a corporate brand world; cared for, expanded and marketed through strategic collaboration between brand owner Hasbro and companies placed inside as well as outside the traditional entertainment industries. It has been suggested that the active, transmedia consumer is the ideal consumer of the *Transformers* brand and this is reflected also in various marketing initiatives which were launched in support of the 2007 film. The next chapter centres on the non-corporate side of the *Transformers* brand — to the *Transformers* fans and their different types of engagement with their object of fandom.
As shown in my theoretical framework, it has been suggested that fans constitute a ‘particularly productive’ group of consumers, and that contemporary communication technology has provided this group with further tools to appropriate commercial commodities, make their own paratexts, and share these with others (Fiske, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; 2006b; Gray, 2010; Sandvoss, 2011). As a result of such ‘prosumer’ activities, it has also been suggested that today’s transmedial brand worlds are built jointly by professionals and amateurs. The ‘hyperdiegetic’ worlds (Hills, 2002, p. 137), founded by the entertainment industries, have their equivalents in fan-produced ‘meta-texts’ (Jenkins, 1992b, p. 98), which consist of mental images in the heads of the fans but which also materialize through various kinds of fan productivity. While my previous chapters have provided details on how Hasbro and other involved companies have worked to build and promote the corporate, hyperdiegetic world of Transformers, I shall in this chapter offer insights into Transformers as meta-text. Or, to use different terminology, into Transformers as a ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006a; Deuze, 2007) in which values other than economic ones become important. This means that I here direct my attention to the Transformers fandom, and to some of the work that the fans undertook in relation to the release of the first live action Transformers film in 2007.

Before, during and after the theatrical release of Transformers, the fans did indeed produce a lot of “alternative pathways” (Gray, 2010, p. 143) that could be regarded as unofficial paratexts (Genette, 1997; Gray, 2010) to the franchise in general and to the film in particular. As recognized by Gray, such fan made paratexts might be “challenging or supplementing those created by the industry, in creating their own genres, genders, tones, and styles, and in carving out alternative pathways through texts” (2010, p. 143). In other words, the paratexts created by the Transformers fans in the context of the 2007 movie verse were potentially either supportive or critical of the officially produced paratexts or producer decisions generally. In accordance with my study’s purpose and research questions, and in respect to my interest in the producer-fan relationship in particular, this chapter includes discussions about the fan-made paratexts’ power to work either against or in favor of the officially produced images of the Transformers brand.

Apart from semiotic productivity, which as noted in my theoretical framework is not unique to fandom but takes place in every meeting with a text, the 2007 film encouraged a bulk of enunciative productivity, or fan talk (cf. Fiske, 1992;
Much of this fan talk took place in the online fan communities, and a great deal of it consisted in speculations about what the film would be like, in terms of for example style, characters involved, or plot. While not always the case, many of the forum threads were triggered by activities initiated by and/or carried out by the companies involved. The hæstigst retrospective look into any *Transformers* community forum archive makes clear that, in particular, marketing initiatives and media coverage of various kinds tended to result in new discussion topics. Ultimately, such company-delivered, promotional content was picked up by the fans as intertextual “clues” about the upcoming film. In some cases, as the previous chapter told, the fans were even actively encouraged to communicate with fellow discussion board members or campaign participants.

In this chapter, I provide some deeper insights into two specific strands of enunciative fan productivity, both of which were set off by activities undertaken by the companies involved in the 2007 film. Firstly, I investigate the responses in one particular fan community forum to the so called announcement video, which was released by the film companies in June, 2006. As told in the previous chapter, this first trailer video offered the fans some of the first glimpses of the imminent film, which is why it is not strange to see that it encouraged a lot of fan engagement on the fan discussion boards. The community forum studied for this purpose is the one belonging to *TFW2005.com*, one of the biggest unofficial *Transformers* communities at the time of writing. Secondly, I examine enunciative fan productivity carried out in relation to the so called ‘Sector Seven’ Experience that was textually analyzed in the previous chapter. As this immersive marketing campaign proceeded, a fan blog called the *Transformers Live Action Movie Blog* (*http://transformerslive.blogspot.com*) would prove to be one of its most dedicated followers, providing the fan base with continuous updates through numerous news posts on the campaign. Both strands of fan talk, I hope to show, offer valuable insights into the producer-fan relationship in general and into the fans’ role in the promotion and hype of the 2007 film in particular.

The fans’ engagement prior to the film release did not restrict itself to fan talk, however, but also resulted in a broad range of textual productivity (*Fiske, 1992; Sandvoss, 2011*). As with other major science-fiction franchises, like for example *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* or *X-Men*, the *Transformers* narrative has inspired a lot of fan-made contents, such as fan-fiction, fan songs (“filk”), fan film and videos (“vids”), fan-art, fan websites, fan reviews, etc. So as to offer insights into some of the “para-textual productivity” that came with the arrival of the 2007 film, I have analyzed two *fan-made trailer videos* which circulated online around...
the time for the film’s theatrical release. These videos, which predominantly were made without any direct encouragement or support from the professional producers, were mainly created from intellectual property material – and in particular from elements found in the official trailer videos. As with the fan talk, analyses of this type of videos might add valuable insights into our mounting understanding of the complex relationship between professionals and fans in the building and promotion of contemporary worlds of transmedial entertainment.

8.1 The *Transformers* fandom

However, before presenting the results of my analyses of the described cases of enunciative and textual fan productivity, I shall offer some insights into the *Transformers* fandom on a different level. Just as the previous chapter began with a necessary account of Hasbro’s and related companies’ branding ambitions and of *Transformers* as a commercial intertext, I here want to place the fans’ productivity into context by introducing the *Transformers* fandom. First, I make a concise account of the offline and online fan spaces in which the fandom has made and makes itself visible, and which have come to develop into platforms for more or less specific communities within the *Transformers* fandom. This account, I argue, is needed to complete the picture of the previous chapter, in which focus was exclusively on the corporate version of the *Transformers* brand world. Secondly, I briefly present images of *Transformers* fans, found through my analysis of how this group of consumers was talked about by professionals involved with the making of the 2007 film. By considering these images, we potentially increase our understanding of the, apparently ambivalent, relationship between the companies and the consumers. After this contextualization I continue by letting the fans speak for themselves – through the results of my interviews with *NordCon* convention attendees. Among other things, this account provides a clearer picture of why so much fan effort goes into the *Transformers* world.

8.1.1 Offline and online fan spaces: At the outskirts of the ‘intertextual matrix’?

The previous chapter sought to capture the intertextual matrix constituting the 2007 movie verse. As told, this matrix included a range of websites in support of the first *Transformers* film. Some of these websites, such as *MichaelBay.com* and *DonMurphy.net*, hosted forums on which the fans were invited to post threads and comment upon existing threads. Prior to the film release, both of these websites functioned as vivid debate platforms on which close to “everything” related to the film became topics of discussion, and controversy. Other web-
sites, such as social media networking platforms MySpace.com and BuzzNet.com, provided additional branded spaces where fans of the brand could “hang out” and communicate with other fans. Still other websites, admittedly existing on the fringe of the matrix but nevertheless vital to the overall film marketing campaign in generating hype, supplied the fans with a continuous stream of news and gossip about the film and related products. This group of websites included popular culture or film sites such as AintItCoolNews.com, Imdb.com, HollywoodReporter.com, MTV.com, Variety.com, EntertainmentWeekly.com, Yahoo!-Movies.com and a range of others of similar kind. With mainstream video-sharing sites like YouTube.com or non-brand specific fan websites such as fanfiction.net or ArchiveOfOurOwn.org, the fans had the means to upload and share their own appropriations on the Transformers brand. Hence, for fans hungry for details and stories about, for example, the filmmaking process, there were, and still is, a range of online environments to delve into.

To the extent that the official Transformers websites, the popular culture online press sites, or the general user-generating websites did not satisfy the Transformers fans’ inclination to interact amongst themselves, fans directed their attention to unofficial Transformers websites initiated and run by members of the Transformers fandom. Largely unaccounted for in the previous chapter yet nonetheless in support of the 2007 movie verse were thus thousands of fan-made websites, often circulating the news and gossip provided by the official channels as well as fan creations of various kinds. It was suggested in my theoretical framework that the Internet has rendered fan productivity more visible (Tushnet, 2007; Gray, 2010; Sandvoss, 2011). Indeed, like many other science-fiction fandoms, the Transformers fandom has a significant presence in the online world.

The question-mark in the heading of this section is meant to propose that the position held by fan-made components within the intertextual matrix constituting today’s transmedial franchises might be changing. As closer inquiries of specific fan productivity in this chapter suggest, in line with previous observations regarding the relationship between industry and fandom (cf. Thornton, 1995; Hills, 2002), that the official and the unofficial Transformers worlds exist not in parallel to one another but rather are increasingly intertwined. Consequently then, fan-initiated websites and other community platforms should perhaps not be considered as peripheral, but preferably as central to today’s converging brand worlds. Indeed, the bond between industry and fan-made websites become particularly evident through news posts, such as the one quoted below, revealing that PR-professionals utilize these fan domains as marketing platforms. Under the heading ‘The ultimate press kit from Hasbro…includes a ton
of movie related items!!!', the following news – along with over 70 attached photos of products and packaging – met the readers of one of the most popular Transformers fan communities roughly a month before the premiere of the new film:

Quite literally, this could very well be the best press kit ever (at least in the eyes of a Transformers fan). I couldn’t believe how generous Hasbro was to send this MASSIVE "press kit" to Seibertron.com today that included a large sampling of the products that will be available on June 2nd, 2007, in stores nationwide. Simply put: this thing is HUGE! It makes the AllSpark look like a Rubik’s Cube. While I’m not quite sure where I’m going to put all of this stuff (those of you who have been to my apartment will know my dilemma), I thought I’d at least share some pictures of what I consider to be the best press kit that I’ve ever seen.

I can’t say thank you enough times to Hunter PR and Hasbro so I’ll just do what I do best and that’s provide you guys with information about these products and this press kit as well as a bunch of pictures to help all of you get excited about this weekend’s release of the movie products (Seibertron, 2007, May 31).

At the time of this writing, the most well-known Transformers online communities of international character included TFW2005.com, Seibertron.com, TFormers.com, Allspark.com, TFwiki.net and TransformersLive.Blogspot.com ("Transformers Live Action Movie Blog"). Out of these, the TFW2005.com community has been known to have a particularly close relationship with Hasbro. Tellingly, the name of the website did feature on a poster in ‘Sam’s’ bedroom in the comic book adaptation on the 2007 film (Oprisko & Milne, 2007, p. 20). In the Nordic region, fan community NTFA.net (Nordic Trans Fans Association) is among the most vivid ones. Generally, these communities offer spaces for enunciative as well as textual fan productivity by including, for example, news sections with commentary functions and fan discussion boards, and sections for fan art, videos, fiction, kitbashing, etc. Beyond this, they normally contain links to various retailers or other Transformers-related websites.

That the Transformers fandom has progressively migrated to the online world (via Usenet) does not mean, however, that offline spaces have become less important. Rather, certain offline spaces have developed into significant meeting-spots for fans normally “only” interacting by the help of discussion boards or commentary fields. Conventions, not least, have come to take on an important role within the Transformers fandom. On the global level, the BotCon convention, or ‘The Official Transformers Collectors’ Convention’ as it is formally labeled since 2003, stands out in terms of both scope and content. For European Transformers fans, the Auto Assembly convention has provided equivalent experiences. This fan-arranged convention debuted in 2000, and has since been held annually in Birmingham, U.K., with the exceptions of 2002 and 2007. In November
2011, the convention also bred a “sister-convention” called Auto Assembly Europe. This small-scale convention was co-arranged with Nordic online community NTFA.com and took place in Uppsala, Sweden (Auto Assembly, 2012). Prior to this collaboration between the British and the Nordic fan communities, NTFA.com had arranged its own fan conventions – the NordCon conventions. It was in connection with the last of these, taking place in 2010 in Alborg, Denmark, that I obtained my focus group interview data.

8.1.2 Images of Transformers fans

In relation to the 2007 film, traditional and online media were flooded with interviews with professional producers involved with the Transformers brand. In addition to this, promotional paratexts such as the DVD extras and the personal websites of members of the film crew included stories and statements about the film production process. In this material, images of the Transformers fans inevitably surface, and since the producer-consumer relationship holds a central place in this thesis, it is valuable to consider how the fans were talked to and about by company representatives or individual professionals. For this reason, this section presents some of the images of fans that emerged in the context of the movie verse. More specifically, it highlights images which surfaced through the discourses provided by professional producers via director Michael Bay’s professional blog, www.MichaelBay.com, and via the DVD documentary included on the two-disc version of the 2007 Transformers DVD. Within the news post from the blog – signed by the director himself and related to the 2007 Transformers film – and the DVD documentary, three overriding images of the fans are particularly prominent: the Disturbing fan, the Providing fan and the Professional fan. Important to note, I have no interest in judging whether any of these images “hold true” according to some “objective” reality outside of the specific contexts analyzed here.

The disturbing fan

The first image of the fans constructed in the analyzed material leaves us with a picture of the Transformers fans as a particularly troublesome group of consumers. This image can be related to previously established discourses of the fan as ‘Other’ and more specifically to representations of the fan as a fanatic and perhaps even dangerous Other (cf. Jenson, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; Hills, 2002; Gray, 2007). It can also be related to Jenkins’ account of fans as “rivals” who infringe on the producers’ creative freedom and who “restrict their ability to negotiate for a larger audience” (1992b, p. 30). The ‘Disturbing’ fan is first and foremost
an annoyance which need to be dealt with in different ways; to be handled or made subject to what could be perceived as fan management techniques. However, despite its undeniably negative imprint, this image is at the same time one of fans as a powerful group of consumers – hence their aptitude to get in the way of the filmmaking process and, thereby, constitute a disturbance to the professionals.

Most notably, the image of the ‘Disturbing’ Transformers fan emerges through statements delivered by director Michael Bay. His professional blog as well as the DVD documentary feature statements referring to apparently unpleasant experiences of fan engagement. In particular, the director would express discontent as fans somehow demanded more information about the filmmaking process, or matters related to this, than the producers were willing to hand out at a specific moment in time. Two events or circumstances seem to have spurred this image: a supposed script leak to Internet users in the late spring of 2006, through which fans got access to a 112-page document with details on the film’s content, and the long-lived and heated debate about voice actors hired for the film. Both of these topics were addressed on MichaelBay.com as well as in the DVD documentary.

On August 18, 2006, MichaelBay.com announced that the “leaked” document circulating Transformers fan communities was in fact a real, albeit aged, version of the film script. Before this was done, however, the director used his blog to comment on the “leak”. Obviously aware of the fans’ interest in details on the not-yet-released film, such as the names of specific robot characters featured in the film, and with the goal of keeping things secret, Bay delivered the following news post on his blog, on May 11, 2006:

> It’s a bit tiresome to watch all the supposed script leaks […] There’s been a lot of chatter about character names and what “things” may be called in the script. I’m going to let everyone in on a little secret. […] Many of the names in the script are aliases. The only people that know the real names of many of these characters are the COO of Hasbro, their corporate lawyer and myself. I think this is two less people that new the secret receipt for Coca-Cola. […]

Shortly after this, on May 28, 2006, another news post on the blog included the following message to the fans, possibly intended to discourage further attempts on behalf of the fans to get hold of and circulate “unsanctioned” material: “I just hope people don’t spoil it for people hearing everything in the movie before they see the movie – that’s so lame”. Furthermore, in one of the clips on the DVD, the director expresses that, due to the leaks: “You could keep nothing secret on this movie”. In an attempt to capture the fan reactions to the circulated material, which among many fans were received with great skepticism, Bay added this: “And people were...
saying, ‘Oh, Michael Bay, you wrecked my childhood, damn you Michael Bay’”. The tone of the director’s voice and his rolling of eyes suggest that he conceived of the critical fans as an annoyance. With the following statement from the DVD added, this image of the fans grows even clearer:

I think a lot of fans hated me for it at first. After I read some of the posts that said they wanted to protest out of my office. They actually picked the wrong office because I had moved. They didn’t know my real address, so… And then the few little talk-backs where they said they want to hunt me down and kill me. I had, you know, I had a couple of those.

Like the script leaks, the choice of voice actors to portray the robots in the film spurred discussions within the online fan communities as well as the image of the fans as disturbances. As evidenced from forum discussions, and as hinted in the previous chapter, large parts of the fandom wanted to have the same voice actors engaged in the 2007 film as those used in the 1986 animated film and the cartoons (most notably Peter Cullen as ‘Optimus Prime’ and Frank Welker as ‘Megatron’). With the background of the vivid and rather infected debate between the film-makers and the fans about the voice acting matter (apparent also on the blog’s own discussion board), Bay delivered the request cited below on February 17, 2006. Obviously, the director had grown tired with the vocal fandom and wanted the fans to have trust in the film team’s competence in delivering a film that would satisfy even “the most religious fans”:

All the posts and talk about the original voices – could we just let it rest for a while? I heard everyone, I’m thinking about it. We are reinventing how the robots look, transform and move. Remember these are the most realistic Transformers you will have ever seen. They have to fit completely into the human world to make this action film credible. I have shown the animatics and some of the hundreds of drawings – TO THE MOST RELIGIOUS OF FANS – they tell me they are “mind-blowing” and “take it to a level they never considered”. I guess that’s good? Time will tell.

This and similar posts on the blog capture the sub-image of the Transformers fans as a particularly conservative audience, resistant to any change that would fit badly with the “classic” Transformers franchise, in which the cartoons and the comic books were the main storytelling vehicles. The above message continued with the following lines, presumably intended to appease the most skeptical fans:

Believe me I respect the fans. But I just want you to give me a chance because I’m working with some really talented artists to create this vision. But it is a vision that allows for growth, change, improvements and surprises. Looking back at the history of Transformers, remember there has been tons of change and improvements over the years.

In relation to this, it can also be noted that much of the contents of the DVD documentary evolved around the topic of change. Again, to conciliate the long-term fans, efforts were clearly made to explain why certain changes had been made (changes in robot appearance was for example motivated through refer-
ences to technical aspects, etc.). As of March 23, 2007, hence almost a full year after Bay’s first expression of exhaustion with the matter of voice actors on his blog, he delivered the following post: “We are still writing the robot voices […]. Boy I get tired of these lame cry babies on the net”. Indeed, this quote, like other mentioned, creates an image of the fans as a bunch of whiny people, disturbing the director in his own creative process. Declaring his intentions in an interview featured on the blog, the director made the following statement: “Listen, I didn’t grow up with the toy, I didn’t grow up with the cartoon, so I’m trying to do my own thing with it” (The Age, 2007, June 29).

The providing fan

Despite the unflattering comments on the Transformers fans as disturbances, an image of the fans as in some meaning powerful is inevitably implied. Undeniably, Michael Bay’s attempts to appease the fans through various statements on his blog and on the DVD give witness to the producers’ recognition of the fans’ powers to influence and perhaps even damage the filmmaking and branding processes. Although possibly nothing but yet another indication of attempted fan control, Bay, and others in the filmmaking crew, did acknowledge fan power in more explicit ways also. Through statements about the fans’ importance as a reserve of knowledge, and explicit calls for fan input in the filmmaking process, a second image of the Transformers fans is established in the research material, namely that of the ‘Providing’ fan. If the Disturbing fan-image can be related to discourses about the fan as a fanatic and even dangerous Other, then the image of the Providing fan resonates with previously established images of the fan as member of an elite Other (Grossberg, 1992), characterized by a particularly productive kind of consumption (Fiske, 1992, p. 30; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; 2006b) and in possession of potentially valuable cultural capital in the form of, mainly, knowledge and creativity (Bourdieu, 1984).

Already a couple of the quotations presented in the above section include rhetoric that contributes to the construction of the fan as some kind of sounding board. Michael Bay asserted that he “respects” the fans and that he was “listening” to their complaints. This rhetoric is repeated in interviews with the director, as for example in an article attached to one of the blog posts:

Bay says he’s been listening all along, “They all think I wasn’t listening, but I was. I didn’t want to make the boxy characters. I was listening to the fans. I know they hated the Optimus paint job with the stripes”, he says, referring to the slightly altered look of his hero Autobot. “That caused a lot of grief”, he laughs (Horowitz, 2007, February 13).
In a similar vein, another attached article-interview included the following quotation from Michael Bay: “You’re never going to make everyone happy and I knew that going into this, but you’ve got to respect the fanbase” (Xpressmag, 2007, June 26).

If statements such as these form the contours of ‘the Providing fan’ image, then the explicit calls for assistance made on MichaelBay.com crystallize it. A few days before the release of the teaser trailer, on December 14, 2006, the director posted the below message on his blog. As apparent, apart from urging the fans to see the video, the post included a direct call for feedback: “I had a room full of 20 Transformers adult geeks, and they applauded at the end. It comes out the 22nd – see it in the theater! Let me know what you think”. In terms of choice of words here, it should be noted that the potentially disrespectful epithet “geek” was frequently used by the director when referring to members of the Transformers fandom. In the DVD documentary, Bay made the following statement, which, apart from including the term geek, adds to the image of the fan as a valuable source of knowledge and feedback during the filmmaking process: “We had some serious, I guess, Transformers…just total head geeks that have been, you know, know lore backwards and forwards that we would vet this stuff through”. As evident also from the below quote, left on the director’s blog on February 18, 2006, Bay used his blog as a channel to access this resource: “I’m working on the third act action, and if you could – what would you imagine for great robot action?”.

Even when the film was almost due for theatre opening, the blog readers were asked to assist with advice – and lobbying. In the lines below, included in a post from May 18, 2007, the director asked the fans to help him change the film’s opening date by one day by spreading the word: “Hey, I want to thank everyone for the kind words on the trailer. […] I would also like fans opinion on opening on July 3rd instead of the 4th. The studio kind of sort of is thinking about which might mean “no”. If you spread the word on the Net – everywhere – they might listen […]”.

The professional fan

The third image that was found in the research material is admittedly closely related to ‘the Providing fan’ image presented above. Like that one, the image of the ‘Professional’ fan becomes constructed through statements accentuating the fans’ role in the filmmaking process. However, the images differ in that the latter suggests that actual members of the filmmaking crew – that is, the paid professionals – were Transformers fans at heart. If the previous two images were chiefly created through statements made by Bay specifically, the image of the ‘Professional’ fan was more jointly established by different people involved with the film. Possibly also a result of fan management objectives – by which the
fans would be asserted that competent people were involved with the film – the DVD documentary especially wants to present the image of the film crew as a group of genuine fans of the Transformers franchise. Needless to say, this image resonates with the contemporary debate on convergence culture, and expressly to the blurring of boundaries between producer and consumer identities (Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b; Deuze, 2007; Sandvoss, 2011). As stressed by for example Sandvoss, in today’s popular culture landscape, “fans operate as producers and media producers as fans” (2011, p. 67). What should be recognized is the potential value of such an image to brand managers seeking to satisfy fan demands or wishes.

Hasbro’s CEO Brian Goldner laid the first pixels to this image in the introduction to the DVD documentary, when making the following declaration: “About 75 percent of all adult men had had a major Transformers experience in their lives. And that’s true almost the world over. So we’ve got this great group of people who all grew up with the brand and are now working on the creation of Transformers, the movie”. The persons referred to in this quote would have included script writers Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci. In the DVD documentary, the writers’ backgrounds as children passionate about the brand are emphasized. Obviously speaking for the two of them, Alex Kurtzman explain their initial anxieties with the project: “We were initially really resistant to the idea of doing it, because it’s something that we had cared about as kids and that’s always kind of a…It’s on the one hand, really exciting to take that challenge and, on the other hand, you go, ‘I don’t want to screw this up’”. Accompanied by footage from the first episode of the cartoon series, Robert Orci adds: “Transformers came out in 84’. And we weren’t quite into girls yet, I think. So it was get home from school, Transformers, glass of milk, brownie. But we saw it right when it came out”. Another self-proclaimed Transformers fan working with the film was animator Charles Alleneck (ILM). Interviewed in a room full of what appears to be his own 600 to 700 hundred Transformers toys (a figure mentioned by Alleneck himself), he describes his involvement with the film project as a personal “full-circle experience”:

You know, compared to some people out there, my collection is nothing. There’s people who have 10 times what I have. I’d estimate I have about six or seven hundred, I think. Working on this movie has been this great full-circle experience for me, going from playing with the toys as a kid to getting to be a part of the movie version.

Similarly, the DVD features statements made by several of the actors involved, declaring their keenness on specific characters from the film. With clips from the 1986 animated film running, lead male actor Shia LaBeouf also pledges his early passion for Transformers: “I was a fan. I mean, from… My childhood was Yogi Bear and the Transformers movie”. Producer Steven Spielberg too tells similar sto-
ries, explaining that he used to play with Transformers toys with his children. Director Bay, in turn, adds to the image of ‘the Professional fan’ by repeatedly telling the story of how he, by being put in “Transformers school” by Hasbro, went from being a non-fan to becoming a Transformers “geek”: “I did a lot of research, a lot of studying on it in the past year and a half. So that would make me definitely a Transformers head geek somehow”. In an interview published on his blog, the director even claims to have become “a gigantic ‘Transformers’ fan” (Hyo-Won, 2007, June 12).

As argued by Gray (2010, p. 81ff), paratexts like DVD bonus material can potentially add value to a film by “making up for” the text’s innate weaknesses. Accordingly, a film accused of being nothing but a commercial cash-cow can possibly be “restored” through bonus material, such as the director’s commentary or behind-the-scenes footage, showing what a great piece of “art” the text actually is. In the light of this, the possibility must be recognized that the efforts to create an image of the producers as fans (as oppose to someone ignorant of and possibly even disrespectful of the franchise) were aimed at appeasing the skeptical fractions of the fandom. By equating their own cultural capital with that possessed by the members of the fan base, the “professional fans” gave the impression of having respected the original Transformers lore. As the below account of fan perspectives will also indicate, this lore does seem to be highly valued by both long-term and newer Transformers fans.

8.2 Fan perspectives on Transformers

The previous chapter indicated that the Transformers brand has developed into one of the most valuable assets for the owner company Hasbro; a capital resource which through proper branding and marketing creates steady streams of income for the toy company per se as well as for its partners. For the fans, Transformers is valuable according to different standards. In this section, I present the results of my focus group interviews with Transformers fans attending the Nord-Con convention in Aalborg, Denmark between June 19 and 20, 2010. This part of the chapter is thus built on accounts offered by my informants. It is “their” truth which is presented here. In later sections, additional fan voices are added in the shape of ‘naturally occurring talk’, retrieved from online forum contexts. The structure of the section resonates with the dominant themes identified in my generated interview data.

8.2.1 “So much to look into”: The meaning of story and characters

The “worldness” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004) of Transformers was praised by the professionals as one of the strongest ingredients of the brand. Hasbro’s docu-
ments accentuated the importance of media in the development of the company’s key properties and especially within the boy action section, where a key part of the company’s strategy, which “focuses on the importance of reinforcing the storyline associated with these products through the use of media-based entertainment” (Hasbro Inc., 2005, p. 13). Writers and marketers alike seem to confirm this image, and the design of the entire ‘Sector Seven’ campaign – like much else of the marketing surrounding the 2007 film – gives further witness to the central role played by fiction and storytelling for the franchise at large.

The fans too seem to rank the existence of spellbinding stories, rich in characters with their own distinctive personalities, high. When asked why they care so much for Transformers, my respondents provided reasons which in a particularly high degree related to the encompassing storyworld developed by the franchise and the existence of a large number of characters in this lore. The different media narratives seem to have constituted important points-of-entry for the interviewed fans, alongside the toys themselves. For several of my respondents, the television series had functioned as gateway into the franchise at the beginning. Many of the older fans had discovered the show already in the mid-1980s. One of my respondents, for example, provided the following explanation to why he became interested in the brand in the first place: “I watched, or re-watched, the videos like, I don’t know, like last year or something, from the 80s cartoons and I thought ‘actually, these are pretty good stories!’ So the stories were above average compared to other cartoons of that era” (R1.1). Another respondent told how she got introduced to the Transformers text through a later reincarnation of the television series, and how she went through some efforts just to be able to watch the cartoon series before going to school in the mornings: “I got up at six just to get ready so I could watch this 40-minute show just before I ran to school” (R4.1). Obviously, the televised narrative played an important part in this fans’ relationship to her object of fandom. For other fans, it was the 2007 film that served as a point-of-entry to the franchise. One respondent gave the following account of his relatively recent discovery of the Transformers world:

Well, it was in connection with this film that came in 2007. I had basically no understanding of Transformers before then, so it was something of a ‘wow-effect’. And then almost half a year later, something like that, I began to look at Transformers on YouTube. Then I saw that there were toys that people bought and collected, and then I thought ‘well, this was interesting’ (R2.3).

For still other fans, the 2007 film came to revitalize a dormant Transformers interest. One fan, for example said that the film along with the discovery of an Internet fandom was the decisive factor for his devotion to the brand. After hav-
ing watched the TV-series in the 1980s but then lost interest in the brand in the 1990s, the film returned him to the franchise.

Then, what is it about the *Transformers* text that makes it so compelling to the fans? For many of my respondents, the answer to this question rests in the classic *evil* versus *good* opposition, with two fractions of robots fighting for the command of universe. As one respondent said, this “simple” but nonetheless intriguing story-concept was what got him interested in *Transformers*: “Well, I mean, it is a very classic story. It’s like the evil versus the good, heroes, anti-heroes, sacrifices and… well, if you boil it down it is a pretty simple concept, but, I mean, it works really, really good just because it is so simple” (R3.2). This reply certainly corresponds to the picture provided by Hasbro’s marketing manager as to why the *Transformers* brand has grown so popular. To recapture, Hans-Christian Ulrich explained this success partly with reference to the “very simple story” built around “a clear set of heroes and villains”. A similar answer was also provided by another of my respondents, albeit this person acknowledged another factor as particularly inspirational: the realism built into the narrative. According to this respondent, it is exactly the high level of realism that separates *Transformers* from otherwise comparable franchises:

> Like so many other cartoons, you have like two fractions: the good versus the evil. But what differs with the *Transformers* case is that, well, the Decepticons’ cause and Megatron’s cause ultimately are about global control of the universe, but here now the quest is more like: “we need fuel”. And it’s a little different from, if you take for example He Man, eh, or G.I. Joe, because their episodes are always about the global control right now. But *Transformers* is more like: “no, we need fuel, first we need fuel”. It’s a little, in my mind, it’s a little bit more realistic […] quest they are on. “The global control thing comes later, right now we need to find fuel!” It’s like, I need… You can relate a little bit more to it, and that’s one of the things I find appealing, that makes it a little bit more interesting than other stories (R2.1).

The realism factor, to which writer Simon Furman would have contributed in his aspirations to develop an “intergalactic story” around the *Transformers* and which indeed had been inserted into the immersive ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, was mentioned by other respondents too. As voiced by one fan, it was the high level of details of the characters along with their “human” traits which got him interested in the brand in the early 1980s. In his own words, expressing what Liebes and Katz (1993) would most likely count as an evident case of referential reading, it “was precisely the resemblances between the robots and as humans” that attracted him to the franchise, and more precisely the robots’ abilities to develop human feelings such as “jealousness, pride or anger” (R2.2).

The *Transformers* brand world has been on an irregular yet nonetheless constant growth since 1984 and this has resulted in a number of parallel “universes” inhabited by a large set of characters. This development, in turn, can be
related to the recognition that fiction has taken on an all the more obvious marketing function as it introduces “a new range of personalities into children’s culture” which commonly are materialized into toy-figures” (Kline, 1993, p. 280). The diversity of stories and characters, produced through the existence of these parallel worlds, was also something that several of my respondents referred to when asked to explain their interest in the brand. As aptly put by one fan, with the Transformers franchise, “you get everything in one package, sort of” (R2.3), and, as this fan also indicated, with universes built around themes popular with young boys, such as “machines”, “aliens”, “action” and even “dinosaurs”, Hasbro had certainly found a way to make the Transformers “relevant” to the consumers – an explicit company goal according to the annual reports (cf. Hasbro Inc., 2005, p. 5; 2008, p. 21).

When talking about the diversity of the brand, the large number of characters inhabiting the many universes was also typically mentioned by my respondents. As voiced by one fan, the “wide range of characters” existent within the Transformers narrative constituted the most central aspect of the entire brand world: “if you ask me what’s most important in this universe, I’d say you’ve got such a wide range of characters. And not only do you see a character five minutes, no, you see characters every Sunday!” (R1.1). Developing his explanation for his interest in the characters, the respondent added: “you connect with them and you know, then these toys get meaning. So, before the cartoon is there, it’s a toy that transforms from a vehicle to something human which is both fun, but then through the cartoon, through [...] the stories; it’s suddenly a character that you can relate to” (R1.1). As indicated here then, the media narrative added new dimensions to the toys and made them relevant to this fan in a way that the toys in isolation could not do. This statement, then, can be associated with Fiske’s argument on the centrality of relevance to popular culture; a relevance that, as he claims, “minimizes the difference between text and life, between the aesthetic and the everyday life” (1997a, p. 6). Like similar statements presented above, this one can be viewed as an expression of referential involvement with the text (Liebes & Katz, 1993). Ultimately, the fans attracted to the realism of the otherwise very fantasy-bound narrative did seem to “treat the program as applicable to real life” (Liebes & Katz, 1993, p. 53) in at least some sense.

As suggested in my interviews also, the rich body of characters did not only make the toys more meaningful to fans; it also held out a promise of a fictional world worth exploring. The many characters in the Transformers text encouraged the fans to study toy package biographies or learn more about the unique robots in other ways. As one of my respondents said, it was precisely the promise of something “to look into” or to “study” which made her interested in the brand:
“And there are many of them. They [the animated cartoons, author’s note] all had tons of characters, all quite developed so that’s what was appealing to me with the old ones, because they have so many characters and so much to look into, and so much to study, you could say” (R4.1). Similar insights were offered by other fans also. As one fan had it, the Transformers world offered a rich universe to “dig into”:

Also, when I re-watch some of the 80s stuff, my favorite episodes, I found out that my favorite episodes from back then are the episodes where the most characters are being introduced. Especially the ones where you have like twenty-plus characters in one episode. ‘Wow, this is just awesome! I can learn about this stuff and...’. And, so yeah, I think there’s something about [the fact that, author’s note] there’s a rich universe that you can really dig into, as a kid (R1.1).

To the extent that the television series or comic books did not develop these character traits enough, some fans turned to the back-cover texts on the toy packaging for more information. As one of my respondents explicitly told me, these so called “tech specs” played a central role to him as a fan: “Exactly those short descriptions were something that kept me hooked and, eh, made me fascinated, and actually even learned them almost by heart” (R2.2). By all means, these reading practices undertaken by the fans would have been triggered by the “legend and mythos” invested in the various Transformers characters and the “feeling of age and ancientness” that, according to Furman, has been added to the entire Transformers lore. Also, they are in line with previously provided images of fans as particularly hungry for knowledge and information about their object of fandom (cf. Baym, 1998; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; 2006b). The status of this type of fan-possessed cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in relation to other types of capital is something that is subject to continued discussion further ahead in this thesis (most notable in chapter 9, ‘Assessing the issue of power: Transformers and convergence culture’).

8.2.2 “It is a part of you, your life”: The meaning of being a Transformers fan

In my conversations with the fans, we tended to be “thrown back” to the issue of what it actually meant to be a Transformers fan, as opposed to being a regular consumer or a fan of other franchises. As recognized by several scholars, fans constitute a specific group of consumers, characterized by deep involvement with fan texts (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002; Staiger, 2005; Sandvoss, 2011). However, as also recognized, for instance by Jenkins (1992b), the borders between fans and mainstream audiences are by no means carved out of stone. Especially in recent years, these borders seem to have become all the more porous, as we witness a “fanatification of audiences” (Nikunen, 2007, p. 111), which in turn can be related to new marketing practic-
es and the development of new, facilitating user-generating media technologies. With this the background, I was curious to find out to what extent the fans constructed themselves as a particular, distinct, group of consumers.

While all of my respondents explicitly identified themselves as fans when confronted with the question, they had different ways of practicing their fandom. Among other things, there were differences in how much time or money people spent on Transformers-related activities or products. The time-span ranged from several hours a day to around ten minutes for some respondents. For those engaging the most with the brand, various types of online activities typically occupied a lot of time, as did the collecting of figures. When asked to exemplify the Transformers-related activities, on which he claimed to spend “several hours” every day, one of my respondents gave the following account:

You visit different forums to check posts and discuss. Then maybe a package has arrived to the post office with some new figure, so then you fetch that, and then you have to make room in your collection to place it there, then you rearrange, sits on eBay or Tradera and looks for new figures, and shares and talks to other fans over MSN. I mean, it’s a lot! (R3.2).

As told before, fans have also been portrayed as a “particularly productive” (Fiske, 1997, p. 37) type of consumers. They have been described as an audience especially keen on “filling in the gaps” existent in popular culture texts (Fiske, 1997b), as “consumers who also produce” (Jenkins, 1992a, p. 208), and as “textual poachers” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 60), taking what they need from corporate narratives or paratexts and turn it into something new. Indeed, fans interviewed for this study embody such images. Basically all of my respondents engaged with some sort of textual productivity on the Transformers brand. Several of the fans took pleasure in so called kitbashing, by which they modified their Transformers toys in various ways. At the convention, some of these creations were showcased in stands whilst others had been photographed for the convention magazine that was delivered to all attendees. Some of the fans also uploaded videos of their kitbashes on YouTube or fan forums and thereby made their creations visible to the remaining online fandom. As expressed by one fan, the activity itself may be a way of “killing time”: “You know, I take some photos on the production process, sort of, and post on forum and things like that, but generally I put them on my shelf at home. It mainly to kill time, it’s a fun thing kind of” (R3.2).

Other fans took pleasure in making up their own Transformers figures in different ways. One respondent, for instance, disclosed an interest in drawing new characters. His ideas, he explained, was based “Not on those which already exist but I’ve tried to come up with new ones” (R2.3). Another respondent, similarly, was engaged in role-playing and used to spend much time with a friend creating their own characters and plots. As explained by this fan, “We create our own characters,
Transformers characters, and we write stories after stories and make big plot arks and relations” (R4.1). Making so called stock-animation movies and reviewing toys were two other creative activities that some of my respondents readily occupied themselves with. Among certain fans, the production process was finalized with the uploading of the videos or reviews on the Internet. Hence, whether in an offline-context such as the NoriCon convention or online, my respondents seem to have taken pleasure not only in producing and appropriating, but also in sharing their creations with others.

While these kinds of productive endeavors have been claimed to separate fans from other less active groups of consumers, the fans themselves seem to have found it difficult to account for specific fan identity markers. When asked to explain the difference between being a fan and a regular consumer of Transformers, many of my respondents hesitated before providing an answer. Apparently, the question was perceived as difficult to answer, which could be why some fans chose to approach it through lighthearted dialogues which played with established fan stereotypes. The following answer was provided in the conversations: “When you start posing death-threats to Michael Bay, then you’re a fan [laughter]” (R2.1).

As suggested by one of my respondents, however, it could be the interest in the continuity of the story that separates the two groups of consumers the most. The true fan, this person suggested, wants to know “what comes next” and have an interest in following the characters involved:

You could of course buy the figures without following neither the television series nor the comic books, but we have this continuous story. You kind of want to know more about what comes next. It is the same thing if you become a fan of a soap opera on TV or Lost of whatever, you want to see the next episode. And it’s the same thing with the media within the Transformers-world then; comic books and the television series. That you actually engage in what happens to these characters (R2.2).

A similar answer was given by another respondent in the same focus group. To him also, an interest in the continuous story was crucial. Whereas a regular consumer might be interested in a brand just because “it’s something new”, the serious fan, according to this respondent, wants something more. Doing away with the image of the fan as someone who buys everything “regardless the quality” (Meehan, 2000, p. 83) of the branded product, this fan describe the fan as a person who ultimately makes the brand part of his or her life. Again, the centrality of “relevance”, as claimed by Fiske (1997a, p. 6), is noticeable: “Well, I think that you follow the series and just have fun! That is, not just because it’s something new but because it gives you something. You don’t have to buy everything, you don’t have to watch everything. Just as long as you, well, feel that it’s a part of you, your life” (R1.2). The same fan continued his account by making a distinction between the long-term Trans-
formers fans and those who could be perceived as short-term “visitors” of the franchise; the latter category of consumers would be someone showing an interest in the brand as nothing more than one “fad” among others. As expressed by this respondent, the first live action film in particular tended to attract the latter category of consumers:

I’m probably going to sound very stupid now, but my interest kind of fell a bit because there were so many arrogant kids that affiliated with the online-fandom. You get so tired of hearing ‘I want to see this character in the next movie’ [uttered in a funny voice and followed by laughter] […] I mean, there were so many that affiliated due to the films and then, well, it gets too much. They all think the same way and so on. But that has gone pass now. They have sort of… Well, Transformers isn’t the big thing any longer. They’ve moved on to Count-A-Strike (R1.2).

This narrative can be placed in relation to other researchers’ observations of online fandoms. As Jenkins has explained, for instance, “fandom’s expanded scope can leave fans feeling alienated from the expanding numbers of strangers entering their fan community” (2006b, p. 142). Certainly, the sentiment expressed in the above quote — and the reference to the “many arrogant kids” especially — could be interpreted in the light of Jenkins’ recognition of “strangers” trespassing the online community. Other fans made a difference between those actively seeking out new information about the brand and those who “stumble over” it in what could be understood as a more accidental way: “Perhaps you could say that they who are always in search of new information about Transformers are fans, while those who only grip what happens to come in their way perhaps aren’t” (R2.3). The relationship between fans and mainstream consumers will be returned to in forthcoming sections of this thesis. As for now, it can be acknowledged that, while not sure about the exact distinguishing features separating them from the mainstream, most of the interviewed fans construct themselves as a particular type of consumers, typically engaged with different forms of appropriative creating.

8.2.3 “Finding home”: Being a Transformers fan in the Internet era

When talking to the convention attendees about their fan identities, it also became evident that, to most of the fans at least, the Internet played an important role. As revealed above, much of the productivity that the fans engaged in either took place directly in an online environment or used the net as a distribution channel to reach fellow fans. For most of my respondents, the Internet provided a space of communication, affording them to socialize with other fans. Online fan communities with forums, several of the fans expressed, constituted important meeting-places for otherwise “isolated” individuals. While recognizing problems related to the increased visibility of fandoms online, such
as that mentioned above of experienced alienation vis-à-vis “strangers”, Jenkins has also claimed that, thanks to online communities, “Geographically isolated fans can feel much more connected to the fan community” (2006b, p. 142). Indeed, as Sandvoss (2011) also argues, the proliferation of online fan platforms has enabled not only new types of textual fan productivity, but also new conditions for enunciative fan productivity.

When asked whether they shared their fandom with any of their friends or not, a number of my respondents gave negative answers. Participants of one focus group even mocked the old stereotype of fans as a particularly lonesome group of consumers:

Net (R2.1).

I’m totally alone [laughter] (R4.1).

I don’t have any friends! You want to be my friend? “Hey, you’re that Transformers guy, right? Get the hell away!” [uttered in a funny voice and followed by laughter] (R2.1).

Without the Internet I’d be sitting in a corner [laughter] (R3.1).

As shown in my theoretical framework, certain discourses – provided by the mainstream media as well as by academics – have described fandom as something close to stigmatic (Jenson, 1992). As apparent from some of the reflective statements offered by my respondents, the fans recognize that these negative images might color people’s perceptions of the Transformers fandom as well. Implicitly – or as in some case even explicitly – my informants did talk about the Transformers fan identity as a kind of “stigma”, making them “suspects” in other people’s eyes. When asked to describe the “typical” Transformers fan, one of my respondents provided the following answer:

Really, Transformers-colllecting or a Transformers interest is something of a… ‘stigma’ might be too big a word but suspect at least. You can be a fan of the Star Wars films, you can be a fan of Star Trek, Lord of the Rings and so on, and no one raises an eyebrow. Nowadays it’s fairly ok to be a fan of Batman or SpiderMan, thanks to the films. But Transformers have, at least up until recently… I mean, it’s just toys. “What type of adult people are interested in toys?”, people wonder. So then it’s like, when you go to the forum you kind of get to be yourself for a moment (R2.2).

Thus, it was this fan’s perception that Transformers fans, due to their general interest in toys, are regarded with more suspicion than fans of other fiction-based franchises. One particular online forum, then, offered this fan a space in which he could be “himself” for a moment. At a different point during my interviews, the same fan told how he, after having been rather lonely throughout childhood and especially in his interest in Transformers, suddenly discovered the Transformers online fandom:
To begin with, I was alone basically throughout my entire childhood, didn’t have many friends and then when I got into contact with Transformers I continued to be alone. I didn’t know anyone else, especially not since I was a bit older, I was 18 when I discovered the toys. […] But then when I eventually discovered that there were thousands of fans out on the net, then I, kind of, found my way home (R2.2).

Hence, for this fan as well as for others, the Internet seems to have created a sense of belonging in an otherwise alienating offline environment. As explained by another respondent, for instance, without the online communities, “you would not have known of each other’s existence, more or less” (R3.2). However, while most of my respondents seem to have found significant pleasure in taking part in online fan discussions, not all fans expressed the need or wish to socialize with other fans online. Providing a perspective departing from those offered by most of my other respondents then, one fan explained his relative disinterest in online communities: “I don’t have the urge to connect that much and talk about it. It’s just: I buy the toys and then I just look at the toys and I’m happy” (R1.1).

8.2.4 “Like geeks with big wallets”: The fans’ relationship to the producers

Another theme around which my focus group interviews came to evolve concerned the fans’ perceived relationships to the companies behind the Transformers brand. In relation to this theme, I asked questions such as “How do you think Hasbro and other companies think of you as fans?” and “Do you think that you are valuable to the companies in any sense?” If the fans in relation to the discussions covered in an earlier section about the attractiveness of the Transformers narrative gave evidence of referential readings of the texts, then the answers provided in relation to these questions included statements which signal a more critical involvement (Liebes & Katz, 1993). Arguably, the topic of discussion encouraged my respondents to do what Liebes and Katz refer to as pragmatic readings of their object of fandom and assess their own positions as fans in relation to the producers as well as to other consumers. As revealed by the answers provided by the fans, many recognized their value as a group of consumers ready to spend money on the Transformers brand. One of my respondents provided a particularly concise, and admittedly rather cynical, answer to the question concerning the producers’ perceptions of the fans: “Like geeks with big wallets” (R3.1). While uttered in somewhat of a sarcastic spirit, other fans also acknowledged their importance as “buyers” or “target groups” of Transformers products. When asked if they think that they are valuable to the companies in any way, one of my respondents replied: “We’re the buyers so, I guess so” (R4.1). Another fan provided the following, more developed answer:
I guess if, if we’re a target group: yes we’re valuable to them. Probably we will buy a lot more Transformers per head, per customer. But if you look at the bigger picture I think the gross of sales is just minus buying for Christmas shopping, so then it’s less important. And if you think of, in terms of image of fans, I don’t think…. It’s perceived probably as very geeky. I wonder if the Hasbro designer would come over and like “wow, you’re the coolest guys on Earth, let’s hang out and drink a beer!”. I sincerely doubt that! [laughter]. But I think in the long run, they do respect the fans because they are the most loyal […] people that buy their products so, yeah (R1.1).

As suggested by the author of this quote, the fans might be perceived as valuable mainly due to their brand loyalty, although in relation to other consumer groups, such as “mums buying for Christmas”, their importance would be more modest. Needless to say, this resonates with recent accounts of fans as a particularly receptive niche market for new commodities (Meehan, 2000; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2007). Also, it can be placed in relation to the understanding – brought forward in my interview with Hasbro Nordic’s marketing director Hans-Christian Ulrich – of the Transformers brand as a “niche” brand cared for by “more dedicated” consumers. Other fans too recognized the fandom’s value as a group of particularly loyal consumers:

Well, there’s the cynical aspect that the more we fans like what they do, the more money they make in the end. So that’s the cynical part of it, but I also think that they appreciate loyal fans. I mean, that there are those who have been around since the beginning […] I guess that’s what I hope, that they think they do something that is important and appreciated by many (R1.3).

The fact that certain series of the Transformers toys have been aimed specifically for collectors were viewed by some fans as evidence of the companies’ appreciation of them as a niche market. Others drew comparable conclusions from the fact that the media narratives typically are filled with subtle references to earlier versions of the Transformers text. Several of the fans expressed appreciation of these intertextual allusions or “Easter Eggs” since they, as suggested by one fan, show that the producers care about the continuity of the fiction: “Yes, I mean it’s recognition of the story, you could say. So that you just don’t sweep everything under the rug” (R2.2). When asked whether or not these references can be regarded as evidence for the producers’ attentiveness to fan preferences, two of my respondent provided answers which centered on the notion that members of the film crew have their origins in the Transformers fandom. As expressed by both of these fans, the existence of intertextual allusions could partly be a consequence of this circumstance. One of them delivered the following comment: “[Long silence] Well, I honestly don’t know. Many of the producers of new Transformers-series are themselves fans, you know. So many insert references for their own sake also, but I mean to some extent I’m sure they’re listening. Definitely, definitely” (R2.3).
Apart from constituting a specific niche target group, many of my respondents also expressed a trust in the producers’ readiness to attend to fan feedback. As exemplified by the quote below, these fans believed that they are being “listened to” and appreciated – if only, as also recognized, for the purposes of profit: “Yes, you get the feeling […] that they do listen to the fans. It is after all a lucrative business so it’s nothing to complain about there. And they do get criticized when they release things that not everybody likes so. Yes, I think it is only positive. They think of us in a positive way, I believe” (R2.3). In the words of another respondent, the fans constitute “a valuable source of information” to the producers, powerful enough to impact on the end products:

I think they do listen from time to time, just to which extent… But I’m sure that also, yeah, the people at Hasbro just look at what the wishes of consumers are. And I think that the fans are a valuable source of information, because they tell you exactly what you need to do with your product. Because, if the fans would say like: “Ah, their face are indistinguishable”, then you could take that input like, “Hey, […] 95 percent of our fans think that our products look over-detailed, let’s do different.” […] So I think that as an information source we are quite valuable so, yeah (R1.1).

The same respondent gave a seemingly very convinced account of how this “source of information” might be accessed by the professionals: “I bet, I bet there are Transformers designers looking on the forums, checking what we want” (R1.1). A similar understanding of the fans as a source of feedback was expressed by other fans also. As recognized by one respondent, for example, “occasionally and sometimes they ask what the fans think and things like that” (R3.2). Statements such as these suggest that the fans are well aware of their value as providers of consumer data and information (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; 2007; 2009; Deuze, 2007; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009). In relation to this discussion, one of my respondents acknowledged another possibility: that the producers may actually take advantage of the fans’ enunciative capabilities in advertising purposes. As recognized by this fan, he and other devotees of the Transformers brand may function as brand promoters by speaking positively about new products (cf. Harris, 1998; Jenkins, 2006a; Ornebring, 2007; Baym, 2009; Yang, 2009; Martens, 2011; Sandvoss, 2011): “We could also be advertising their stuff. If they bring out new stuff and they do it good then word-of-mouth would spread” (R1.1).

As suggested in my theoretical framework, when the producers undertake actions which do not concur with the fans’ ideas of how “their” brand should be handled, conflicts may well occur. The legal ownership of the brand then clashes with the fans’ perceived “shared” (Shefrin, 2004, p. 273) or “partial” (Gray, 2010, p. 165) ownership. When asked if there was anything that could happen that would make their interest in Transformers decrease, the fans did dis-
close some dissatisfaction with the owner company Hasbro’s treatment of the brand. Too high price tags, unsatisfying quality of the products, limited availability, and too much “recycling” were four types of criticisms which surfaced during the discussions. Another type of criticism that several of the respondents returned to, even across separate sessions, concerned the ways in which the Transformers brand has been marketed. In view of other perspectives offered in this thesis, which point to the advertising saturation in relation to the new film, it was surprising that several fans shared an understanding that new Transformers products tend to be poorly advertised, at least in the Nordic region. Along with too high prices, this particular critique was, for example, articulated in the following way by one of the fans:

No advertising for the figures what so ever; neither on TV nor in other media. No advertising for them in the stores. I mean, nothing at all. I find that quite astonishing! I mean, there’ve been no efforts at all to market these figures. And then it ends up with the big retailers such as Ica Maxi and Coop Forum, purchasing some figures and then they kind of don’t know what to do with them. So they put sort of a very high price on them and then they just sit on the shelves collecting dust, because nobody buys them because nobody knows what it is. I mean, it’s sick! (R3.2)

Another fan expressed similar complaints, albeit also recognizing that the films made on the brand tended to change things – in the mind of this fan, for the better: “When we do see advertising for the Transformers toys is in relation to the films, like in 2007 and 2009 when hamburger restaurants delivered some toys and so on. That’s the only time, really. They should have done more promotion” (R1.3). Other fans too had noticed a difference in the marketing practices surrounding the films. Talking about the impact of the 2007 film, and the relatively encompassing advertising efforts that came with it, one of my respondents recognized the cross-promotional forces involved. In the view of this fan – and obviously in line with Hasbro’s own intentions as declared in its annual reports – “the marketing of the films has been so strong that it has actually helped Hasbro and the figures too, in lack of own advertising” (R2.2). This acknowledgement can also be claimed to concur with Hans-Christian Ulrich’s understanding of the film as “inspirational” for consumers outside of the official target group, including children.

Also in relation to my question whether there is anything that could happen that would cause the fans’ interest in Transformers to decrease, several of my respondents gave similar answers. What many seem to have agreed on is the idea that a continuous delivery of new products is crucial for their inclination to stay loyal to the Transformers brand. One fan, for example, said that he would tolerate most of the producers’ decisions, “as long as we get something new”: “If they’d stop producing anything new. If you’d just completely shut it down, I mean no new series for
ten years, no new toys for ten years. I like the vintage stuff but I need something new to keep me interested. So that would be it, to be honest. I mean, I can live with most of what they throw at us as long as we get something new” (R3.1). Other respondents from the same session expressed sympathies with this perspective, for example, by adding the following statements:

One of my problems with sticking to a fandom is when it stops. Because, sometimes I know it’s good that it stops; it’s the right time and everything that it just dies out. But when it stops it can hold like some months and then you don’t have anything to look into and just nothing more to read, or draw you could say. So I’d lose interest if that happened to Transformers. I mean, it would hold no longer than some months but then it would also die out (R4.1).

Thus, a steady stream of new elements into the intertextual matrix which constitutes the Transformers world was claimed to be decisive for some of my respondents’ fandom. While not appreciative of every new element added to the Transformers franchise, these fans hence embraced novelties in the brand world. This finding could certainly be explained with reference to Campbell’s notion of “imaginative anticipation” (2005), yet beyond this the longing for “something new” could also be seen as an effect of fans’ interest in appropriative practices. Indeed, given the fans’ attentiveness to various types of, not least, textual productivity, the need for new “raw material” to excorporate into fan texts is understandable (Hebdige, 1979/1988; Fiske, 1992). The first live action film, as told by a couple of my respondents, constituted one such welcome novelty which helped revitalize of the Transformers brand and which inevitably brought the fans new characters and narrative details to “look into”. In the subsequent section, more fan voices will be heard, yet this time as online fan talk in relation to one of the first components of the anticipated 2007 movie verse: the so called announcement video.

8.3 Fans as supporters and critics: Fan talk about a promotional video

In support of the 2007 film, a range of different promotional videos were produced, including both TV-spots and trailer videos. The first of the trailers was released on June 29, 2006 and gave the audiences some of the first clues as to what to expect from the first live action Transformers film ever made. Released over a year before the film’s theatrical release, at a time when little actual footage was available, the so called announcement video left the audiences with many unanswered questions, in terms of the film’s plot, characters, coherence with earlier Transformers texts, etc. The video, hence, did not only raise awareness about the film but also encouraged a lot of fan talk or, to speak with Fiske (1992, p. 38), enunciative fan productivity. After the release of the announce-
ment video, discussion boards within the Transformers community were saturated with speculations, praises and criticisms in regard to the upcoming film. The fans’ reactions to the video were diverse and ultimately triggered a heated debate about the upcoming film’s place within the larger Transformers world. Yet, while much of the fan talk in relation to the announcement video came as a reaction to it, the video was also preceded by much fan speculation. Already when the professional producers first hinted that the video would be released, fans started to envision what it would be like, and to share their ideas with other fans online. Thus, the video’s public life actually began even before it was released – among the fans. Following Gray (2010), the fan talk itself should be considered a paratext – to both the announcement video and, in turn, to the live action film.

In this thesis, the fan talk surrounding the first announcement video has thus been analyzed as one paratext among many which appeared in relation to the 2007 Transformers film. Again, with reference to earlier research findings, it should be recognized that fan contributions to the Transformers world potentially play similar roles as official paratexts. As has been empirically shown before, fan talk potentially adds to both the visibility and the hype of an event or a commodity (cf. Baym, 2009; Gray, 2010). For the same reason, fan paratexts should not be neglected in the analyses of corporate marketing campaigns and brand building processes. The fan talk surrounding the Transformers announcement video, as this section will exemplify, can be said to have served a double function: it prepared the grounds for the video so that once it was released it became a franchise event (Grainge, 2008, p. 130), and it extended the video’s life by circulating both the video itself and information about this online. Thus, while probably not intended at such, the fan talk potentially served as an advertisement for the trailer – and, by extension, for the film itself. When recognized as having such a promotional function, the fan talk can indeed be said to have carried “supportive intertextuality” (Gray, 2006) and ultimately constituted a supportive unofficial paratext.

Important to note, though: the recognition of the fan talk’s commercial value must not blind us to see its value outside of the commercial context. As, for example, Liebes and Katz (1993) remarked, as well as Jenkins (1992b), fandoms constitute interpretive communities in which fan texts are made meaningful collectively, and for example through referential and critical readings. In my previously presented interviews with convention attendees, both types of decoding was detectable as the fans interpreted Transformers as a narrative universe invested with some sense of “realism”, on the one hand, and as a cultural
commodity in demand of audiences of scale, on the other. As my analysis of enunciative fan productivity in relation to the announcement video will also make manifest, the online fan talk involved reflective and largely critical statements about what the Transformers franchise actually consists of, what it should consist of, and what audiences the franchise is ultimately designed for. In a considerable degree, these discussions involved images of the relationship between the fans and the professional producers in which the latter group come across as both allied and enemy. For the purpose of this thesis then, these discussions offer valuable insights into the power-relationships between the fans and the professional producers and the ways in which control is sought and exercised by both parties. To the extent that the fan talk involved negative or even damaging discourses, it can be said to have promoted “critical intertextuality” (Gray, 2006) and functioned as (also) a critical unofficial paratext to the 2007 film.

The aim of this section, then, is to offer insights into some of the enunciative fan productivity that was undertaken in the context of the 2007 film, and more specifically to understand the fan talk’s capabilities to offer both support and challenges to the professional producers. The section is divided into two parts. In the first and most encompassing of these, I present the fan talk as on the one hand a supportive unofficial paratext and on the other as a critical ditto. Already this account, as will be evidenced, leaves us with clues about the fan talk’s promotional function as well as the fan-producer relationship. In the second part, however, I make a more focused account of both these aspects and make manifest some of the complexities involved here. As mentioned in my methods chapter, the fan talk analyzed was extracted from one of the largest online communities dedicated to the Transformers brand, TFW2005.

8.3.1 The fan talk as ‘supportive’ paratext

Perhaps most obviously, the fan talk’s potential to constitute a supportive unofficial paratext to the 2007 film derived from forum posts possibly contributing to the hype of the announcement video itself as well as the upcoming film. This hype in turn, I shall argue, was created primarily through fan expressions of anticipation of and excitement over both the paratext and the film. As will be shown below, the announcement as well as news about the announcement spurred a lot of positive reactions on the TFW2005 forum, which could be referred to either one or both of these categories of hype. In addition to this, the fan talk can be claimed to have had a supportive function by potentially increasing the acceptance of the film per se but also of the people involved with its pro-
duction. This acceptance, in turn, would have been created through fan expressions of loyalty to, sympathy with, or at the very least, tolerance towards the various decisions undertaken by the professionals within the context of the 2007 film. In what follows, I provide deeper insights into the supportive role of the fan talk by making manifest how it might have contributed to both the hype and acceptance of the first live action Transformers film.

Anticipation and excitement: The fan talk as ‘hype’

The first mentioning of the announcement video on the TFW2005 discussion board was made in a thread that was started on May 15, 2006. The thread began with a link to film director Michael Bay’s blog and more specifically to the blog’s news section. Under the heading Transformers Teaser Date, published on May 13, 2006, the following information was delivered: “The teaser and poster for the Transformers film will be out July 4, 2006”. As indicated earlier, Bay’s blog represented one of the most important channels for news about the production of the upcoming Transformers film, why it can be expected that this short piece of information was intended to be picked up by other media as well as by the Transformers fan communities. Indeed, the news spread quickly within the TFW2005 community and in the next few days after Bay’s revelation, the website’s forum was filled with fan reactions to the news, which basically functioned as a teaser for a video, which in turn was intended as a teaser for the upcoming film. Obviously, the professional producers did their best to make sure that the film, not due for another year at that point in time, would not escape the consumers’ attention.

What the post featuring Bay’s news immediately seems to have created among the fans is anticipation. A review of the posts following instantly from this first news item makes evident that the producers had managed to turn the announcement video into an anticipated event for many of the fans. It was after all one of the earliest promises that a high-budget film on the Transformers brand was actually being made. Among the first positive responses were commentaries indicating that the video (and the poster) were something that the fans really looked forward to exploring, typically including wordings such as “sweet! can’t wait for them!” (P1.1, 2006, May 15), and “Really looking forward to the teaser, the announcement video.”

35 It should be noted, in order to avoid confusion, that what Bay here calls “teaser” in fact is the video that later, on the official movie website, came to be called the “announcement” video. Hence, the reader should keep in mind that when the fans write about the “teaser” in the posts quoted below, they actually refer to the video described as announcement in my earlier analyses and not the “real” teaser that came out in December 2006.
too!” (P2.1, 2006, May 15). Then, as new pieces of information about the yet-not-released video came to fans’ knowledge, the buzz on the TFW2005 discussion board got new energy. Especially, in the earliest posts, speculations were made concerning the concrete contents of the video as well as of the film itself. Not surprisingly, a “leaked” written description of the announcement video’s contents, originating from producer Don Murphy’s website, triggered a lot of fan talk. Again, expressions of anticipation were typically aired.

Only three days after the written description had been “leaked”, and a few days earlier than planned, the announcement video was finally released. This happened on the official movie website on June 29, 2006. In the first thread including this information, the news was presented under the heading Teaser trailer on official site and with the following message (the underlined phrases or words are links directing the user to the website in question; this goes for all quotations included in this and forthcoming presentations of results): “No need to worry, its officially out. Saw it here: http://www.transformersmovie.com/” (P5.5, 2006, June 29). A second and rather lengthy thread spurred by this release started off with a post containing the following information – and unmistakable eagerness:

[…] The teaser has been officially launched. [...] GO TO www.transformersmovie.com TO SEE IT! [...] I’ve got a major case of the giddies. To know that this is going to be released – and to see an OFFICIAL teaser like that – its just awesome. And I mean “awesome”, too – like, as in truly “Oh my freakin’ God, it’s real!” awesome (P6.6, 2006, June 29).

Judging by the responses by other discussion board members, many followed the thread-starter’s enthusiastic call and saw the video within minutes after the link had been published (on www.TFW2005.com or elsewhere). Having “finally” seen the actual announcement, the anticipation expressed on the forum from here on was primarily directed towards the film itself. Many fans claimed to be thrilled over what they had seen and voiced that the promotional video had them longing for more glimpses of the film’s content.

Hence, news about the announcement video and eventually the video as such spurred quite a lot of expectations on the TFW2005 forum. As apparent from other forum posts, the time aspect – the actual wait – seems to have been viewed by some of the fans at least as an important part of the whole film experience. “Longing” and “daydreaming” then, to borrow from Campbell (2005) ultimately come across as attractions in themselves. Interestingly, when members of the forum discovered that the video, allegedly because of Internet “leaks”, had been released before the planned 4th of July the reactions were diverse. While some, as will be further shown below, seem to have considered the producers’ change of plans as some sort of fandom victory, others were less appreciative of this. Some fans even accused other members of the fandom of
having caused the pre-release of the announcement video and thereby “ruined” what was supposed to have been a special “event” on the American Independence Day. More than one fan expressed a sentiment similar to that voiced in this post: “Now the anticipation for July 4th is gone. It’s totally useless now” (P13.6, 2006, June 29). Further expressions of anticipation, however, were delivered in later posts, as fans, drawing on what they had seen in the announcement video, began to discuss what the new film would add to the Transformers world. Again, while far from every fan communicated positive expectations, many looked forward to what the film would bring: “It’s going to be a whole new world guys, and I can’t wait” (P14.6, 2006, June 30).

Apart from anticipation, the announcement video and related news also generated expressions of excitement among the fans on the TFW2005 discussion board. Already when the first revelation of the video’s release date was offered, the members began to post commentaries including statements such as, for instance, “jumps for joy” (P15.1, 2006, May 15) or “Awesome to the max!” (P54.1, 2006, May 15). Later, the “leaked” written description of the video’s contents would produce similar celebrative expressions, including “Sweet!” (P18.4, 2006, June 26), “That’s cool” (P19.4, 2006, June 27), and “OH MAN I AM SO PSYCHED!!!” (P4.4, 2006, June 27). Then, once having seen the actual video, obviously impressed fans added further testimonies of excitement to the discussion board. Clearly, some fans were positively surprised by its contents:

Every other Transformers board I got to posted the link, so I just watched it and I was pleasantly impressed. I never expected the teaser to show me any robots or transforming. […] This trailer was much more than I was expecting and has me adequately hyped. But now that I’ve seen it, Don Murphy might sue me! (P25.6, 2006, June 29).

By writing on the announcement video or the upcoming film itself in these positive ways – as something worth anticipating and be excited over – the fan talk can be claimed to have contributed to the wave of hype that preceded the 2007 Transformers film. Indeed, the celebratory discourses quoted above show resemblance to persuasive advertising language and potentially gave the fan talk – even if unintentionally – a supportive role comparable to those played by the official marketing. In addition to this, however, the fan talk carried out on TFW2005 forum can be claimed to have potentially increased the fandoms’ acceptance of the overall film project. In particular, expressions of loyalty, sympathy or tolerance vis-à-vis the people involved with the project can be assumed to have benefited the professionals.
Loyalty, sympathy and tolerance: The fan talk as promoter of ‘acceptance’

As indicated above, and as opposed to what one might have expected given the fans’ usual interest in information related to the upcoming film, many fans expressed frustration with the premature “leaking” of information about the video. When complaining about these unappreciated leaks on the forum, or otherwise discussing the film production process, several fans came to express different degrees of loyalty to and/or sympathy with the professional producers. Some of these fans, as revealed by quotes such as the following, recognized the “hard work” that went into the film project at different stages of development:

*All joking aside, his [producer Don Murphy’s, author’s note] anger this time around is completely understandable. I wouldn’t want my stuff being leaked and I’m sure a lot of people have been working extremely hard to keep the cool stuff under wraps. Besides, why leak the trailer at this point? It was going to be officially released in only a few short days, c’mon… (P25.6, 2006, June 29).*

*There’s going to be a ton of people working very hard on this film for the next year. Their hearts and souls will go into their work, and we shouldn’t assume even for a second that anything we don’t agree with was an oversight by the film makers (P30.8, 2006, July 6).*

Other forum members accentuated the expertise knowledge that was invested into the film project, and urged fellow fans to have trust in the creative talents involved. Some emphasized that “Hollywood experts” (P28.8, 2006, June 30) were working on the film, whereas others praised individual members of the film team for their efforts. In addition to this, many discussion board members also expressed sympathy with decisions made by the producers, not least by arguing that certain changes undertaken by the film team were either positive or necessary for the future of the franchise. While some, after having seen the announcement video, were concerned that the film would not be coherent with the *Transformers* world that they had learned to love, other fans held that the film had to be different from earlier texts. Offering expressions of a more tolerating attitude towards change, the latter group of people generally foresaw “a new continuity”, “a whole new world” or “a new story” to emerge with the film. The below quote can be used to exemplify this kind of sentiment:

*I would love to see the movie recreate the cartoon exactly but no movie can do that. It has to be different. I’ve set my mind knowing that it will be different. If it’s the same it’s too predictable and you would look for differences anyways. […] Just accept the fact that it will be a new story with a lot of familiar elements and enjoy it (P26.6, 2006, July 1).*

Hence, as indicated by the above examples, fans on the TFW2005 forum took on the “task” to convince fellow fans to have trust in the film team as well as in the project at such. Through expressions of loyalty, sympathy or, at the very least, tolerance, this part of the fan talk would then have benefitted the compa-
nies in the same way as the cheerful, hyping forum language described and exemplified above. However, to repeat, far from all fan talk can be claimed to have taken on a supportive function vis-à-vis the producers. Next, I will indicate how the fan talk simultaneously came to function as a critical unofficial paratext, possibly posing challenges to the film’s marketers and brand managers.

8.3.2 The fan talk as ‘critical’ paratext

If expressions of anticipation and excitement directed towards the announcement video or the live action film itself can be assumed to have contributed to the hype that preceded the 2007 film, jargons of skepticism and disappointment found within the fan talk possibly contributed to the opposite: anti-hype. Indeed, the TFW2005 forum was full of negative statements, about the video paratext as well as the film, which potentially lowered at least some people’s enthusiasm for the upcoming film (although I shall complicate matters in subsequent sections by recognizing the possibility that even unflattering fan talk might play a supportive role). In addition to this: many of those who did not communicate their support of the film project itself or the producers involved with it instead tended to express anxiety with, a competitive attitude towards, or distrust in these, thus presumably fostering doubt rather than acceptance for the overall film project.

Skepticism and disappointment: The fan talk as ‘anti-hype’

At the same time as the first appreciative remarks in relation to the announcement video were posted on the TFW2005 forum, negative comments also began to appear. For the “leaked” written description of the video did not spur only positive comments but also, as disclosed in the examples below, feelings of skepticism and disappointment. Many of the post writers were concerned either with the video’s content as such or with the actual trustworthiness of the description. With statements such as “I hope this is a joke” (P31.4, 2006, June 27), “I’m disappointed already” (P32.4, 2006, June 27), “I hope this cheesyness isn’t the real thing” (P32.4, 2006, June 27), “$50 bux says the pics are fake.” (P33.4, 2006, June 27), or “What the hell are Transformers doing on Mars anyway?” (P25.4, 2006, June 27), the fans certainly expressed their dissatisfaction with the imagined content of the video. Then, when the actual video had been released, more negative remarks were delivered on the forum. Expressions of skepticism and disappointment continued to flourish, as exemplified by commentary such as: “CRAP!!!!! I waited 15 mint and it sucked!!! Now Spidey 3 was a teaser trailer that ROCKED!!!! I would have rather not seen anything ;(“ (P35.6, 2006, June 29), or
“Careless – that’s the vibe I’m getting. I was looking forward to this trailer -- now I wish I hadn’t seen it” (P36.6, 2006, June 29).

Much of the fan-criticism seems to have been sprung out of an understanding, obviously shared by many fans within the community, of the video as being non-coherent with the *Transformers* text that they had come to know over the years. To borrow from Hills (2002) and Jenkins (1992b), when evaluated against the meta-text – the ideal version of the *Transformers* narrative universe, as claimed by at least some fans – the new pieces brought to the *Transformers* hyperdiegetic continuity by the announcement video seem to have fitted poorly. Although hardly visible in the promotional video, the robot design became especially criticized by parts of the fandom. Through statements voicing that the video “has nothing to do with *Transformers* at all” (P25.6, 2006, June 29) or that the producers “are changing a classic design element that has been around for twenty years for no apparent reason” (P38.6, 2006, June 30), some fans readily expressed their dissatisfaction with these matters. As exemplified by the following quote, many of the more reluctant fans were disappointed not to find more elements from the “original” *Transformers* lore in the video: “I felt they gave us 99% crap and 1% of *Transformers* (that don’t transform at all). I saw the logo and I don’t like how it transforms. BTW didn’t Murphy promise us that they are going to use the original G1 transformation sound?” (P37.6, 2006, June 29).

Hence, through these and similar statements offered on the TFW2005 forum, the announcement video and by extension the upcoming film were the object of far from celebrative, “advertising-like” discourses. Adding expressions of anxiety, competition and distrust to this, it is not hard to recognize the fan talk’s character as a critical unofficial paratext, potentially producing both anti-hype and suspicion towards the film project at large.

*Anxiety, competition and distrust: The fan talk as promoter of doubt*

Expressions of anxiety were not only found in discussions about the actual “quality” of the announcement video or the film to which it was attached, but also in relation to fan talk debating producer decisions. A review of forum posts suggests that the film studios undertook action when they realized that unsanctioned material circulated on the TFW2005 forum. The existence of “removed” material or links on the discussion board is evidence of this, as are specific requests from the board administrators not to circulate copyrighted stuff: “Please DO NOT post or link to the images from the trailer. We have been asked to remove them by Paramount” (P39.4, 2006, June 28). A similar post included the following explanation to why the post with the title *Teaser online NOW!* had been removed from
the board by the administrators: “Paramount has already contacted us about the pics and this would get us in even deeper trouble.” (P39.3, 2006, June 29). Thus, the film studios seem to have monitored the fan community for unsanctioned use of copyrighted material and interfered when the fans attempted to circulate this material on the forum. That the fans were well aware of the producers’ legal powers vis-à-vis the fandom, and clearly worried about what they might be used for, was obvious in many of the posts dealing with the leak of the announcement video. Many of these expressed anxieties over the wisdom that the fans’ activities could potentially lead to litigations:

- I’d suggest deleting that link, dude. You’re getting yourself into poop (P6.6, 2006, June 29).
- This trailer was much more than I was expecting and has me adequately hyped. But now that I’ve seen it, Don Murphy might sue me! (P23.6, 2006, June 29).
- Would be nice if SOME things about this movie could be revealed without risking legal litigation from Don or DreamWorks (P13.6, 2006, June 29).

As suggested by the last of these quotes in particular, some of the fans expressed discontent with the producers’ readiness to claim their rights over material related to the 2007 film. Some also came to take on a competitive attitude towards the producers, prompting a discourse which presented the producer-fan relationship as some type of game or battle. While the studios obviously did try to restrict the fans’ usage and sharing of copyrighted material, some fans nonetheless made sure that access to the video would not be eliminated. Obviously with a clear feeling of triumph over the producers, one fan wrote the following comment on the forum: “ha! I grabbed it [the announcement video, author’s note] before they took it down!!! Finally, one step ahead of the game. *laughs maniacally*” (P41.6, 2006, June 29). Thus, as suggested by this quote, with the “leaking” of copyrighted material prior to the video’s scheduled release, the producers were understood to have lost some of their power to the Internet-savvy fandom. Other posts promoted a similar discourse by talking about “losses” and “battles” (P23.6, 2006, June 29) in relation to the circulation of content on the board.

Apart from voicing anxiety with the copyright issue and a competitive attitude towards the film team, many of the posts on TFW2005 also gave witness to fans’ distrust in the producers’ abilities or willingness to attend to the fandom’s preferences and wishes. In several posts commenting on the video, the fans expressed a feeling of “not being listened to” and, ultimately, that they as fans had little or none control over the direction in which the entire Transformers text was developing with the new film. Some of the fans who expressed criti-
cism about the changes undertaken, voiced that it was obvious that the professional producers privileged profits over what these fans perceived as the original *Transformers* text. These fans often raised arguments that the producers were unfaithful to the franchise’s “source material”, “key elements”, “core” or “basic premises”, and consequently disrespected the long-term fans. The following post excerpt aptly exemplifies this sentiment:

*The movie is “Transformers” in name and concept, but does not seem to follow other key element, or bring a deeper understanding to itself. It is as though they see “Transformers” as a popular franchise that they can profit from and they are unable to see where its inherent value lies. When a director really respects a franchise (like with Superman Returns), they don’t go around making arbitrary decisions. They consider everything, and understand it from its core (P5.6, 2006, July 4).*

Concurring with this and similar commentaries, another fan was particularly clear about the “business”-side of the *Transformers* world and especially recognized the value of having an established brand-name with a solid fan base:

*One reason why this film would have been made is because Transformers is a successful brand-name, and has been doing well for a decade due to mainly toy-sales. So for DreamWorks, the studio that got it (the concept), they have an already successful franchise + nerd nostalgia + everybody else who might have heard of TFs = probable summer blockbuster (P43.7, 2006, July 7).*

Thus, some fans seem to have experienced a contradiction between profit-making, which would depend on the success of the film within the wider audience, and faithfulness to earlier versions of the *Transformers* text, which would probably please the fans more than the average cinemagoer. Additionally, while quite many fans voiced that they had confidence in the producers’ film-making skills, others distrusted the producers’ knowledge about or care for the text per se. In an attempt to explain the apparent troubles of certain fans to accept the film project, one forum member made the following remark: “They believe they know more about Transformers than the people making this movie. And you know what? They are right. We are on a TF message board because we love TFs. I bet 90% of the people on this board do know more about the characters than those involved in this production” (P3.8, 2006, June 30). In the end then, by constituting an arena for criticisms primarily based on notions of skepticism and disappointment, as well as on feelings of anxiety, competition and distrust, the fan talk on TFW2005 must be recognized also in its role as a critical paratext, potentially challenging the producers’ preferred images of the 2007 film and the *Transformers* franchise as a whole.
8.3.3 The fan talk as a vehicle of promotion

So far, the fan talk about the announcement video on the TFW2005 forum has been read as both a supportive and critical unofficial paratext. On the one hand, it has been suggested that by involving positive and enthusiastic statements about the announcement video and the 2007 film *per se*, the fans’ enunciative productivity can be expected to have worked in favor of the professional producers. From this perspective then, the fan talk can be claimed to have constituted a supportive paratext, overlapping rhetorically with the official paratexts rather than running against or parallel to them. As such a paratext, the fan talk would have reinforced the producers’ promotional messages about the upcoming film. On the other hand, it has also been proposed that through negative discourses, running counter to official promotion that was launched to support the film, the fan talk potentially constrained rather than facilitated the marketers’ work. From this perspective, then, the fan talk could be said to have formed an alternative route to the film, running parallel to or even against the official promotion (cf. Gray, 2010).

On the whole, however, the promotional function of the fan talk analyzed here is admittedly more complex. What needs to be recognized, to begin with, is that even as a critical paratext, the fan talk might still have functioned as a vehicle of promotion to members and readers of the TFW2005 forum. Most notably, although the reactions to the video clearly were not exclusively positive on the forum, the fan talk can nevertheless be assumed to have contributed to raising peoples’ awareness about the upcoming film. By starting threads on the topic and by discussing and evaluating the video, the fans certainly created attentiveness within the community – to the announcement but also to the entire film project. The speculations triggered by the video turned it into something more than merely an advertisement for the film. Ultimately, it became treated by the fans as a *franchise event* (Grainge, 2008, p. 130), well worthy of analysis and evaluation. Due to these discussions and speculations, few people on the forum, if at all active, would have missed the release of the first trailer-video. Thus, it could be argued that regardless if the posts were predominantly negative or positive in tone and language, the fact alone that the fans devoted considerable space and time to talking about the announcement video and the film itself made both of these objects to hype. If the old saying “all publicity is good publicity” carries any truth, then the fan talk would certainly be gold’s worth to the involved companies. After all, the fan talk did constitute “buzz” – a recognized valuable asset on an advertising saturated media market (Örnebring, 2007; Needham, 2008).
Beyond this, the fan talk can be claimed to have been caught up in the promotional circuit surrounding the 2007 film by directing the fans into other textual components within the *Transformers* world. The fact that the links to the video itself as well as related material were circulated on the TFW2005 forum makes it legitimate to conclude that the community served as something of a springboard to the video as well as to the film project *per se*. As shown above, the members of the forum explicitly directed other fans to the video and encouraged people to “GO TO” the official website “TO SEE IT!” Also, by providing links to and talking about websites, such as those run by director Michael Bay’s and producer Don Murphy, the fans made each other aware of these official, promotional vehicles also. Hence, the fan talk potentially served as an entry door not only to the announcement video that constituted the main topic of discussion here, but also into the wider 2007 movie verse.

### 8.3.4 The fan talk and the fan-producer relationship

My reading of the fan talk about the announcement video as one the one hand supportive and on the other hand critical also suggests that the discussing fans had different understandings of their relationship to the professional producers. Again, the fan-producer relationship has previously been described as anything but uncomplicated (cf. Jenkins, 1992b; Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2011). Fans contributing to giving the fan talk a supportive character tended to align themselves with the producers by expressing their loyalty to, sympathy with or at the least tolerance towards their various decisions in the context of the film project. Indeed, when delivering this type of embracive discourses, the fans no doubt presented themselves as ‘providers’ in relation to the professionals and the companies they represent (see section 8.1.2). Conversely, fans who can be said to have made the fan talk a critical paratext more often made statements – expressing anxiety, competition or distrust – which indicated a hostile attitude towards the producers’ ways of handling the project. Here then, the fans instead showed their capacity to ‘disturb’ the production process, mainly by delivering oppositional discourses.

To say the least, the announcement video caused heated debates among the discussion board members and lead to different assumptions about the professional producers’ handling of the franchise. In broad terms, it seem as though the fans’ attitudes towards the announcement video – and, by extension the film – were dependent upon the fans’ perceptions of the textual relationships existent within the transmedial world of *Transformers*. As found also by Jonathan Gray and Bertha Chin in their analyses of fan talk about the first of Peter Jack-
son’s films on the Lord of the Rings franchise, a new element added to a transmedial world tends to be interpreted and evaluated against the background of earlier storytelling components found within this world (see Gray, 2010, p. 119). So was Jackson’s film, for example, interpreted and evaluated by the fans in the light of J.R.R. Tolkien’s books. “Sometimes”, Jenkins explains too, “fans respond to this situation with a worshipful deference to media producers, yet, often, they respond with hostility and anger to those who have the power to ‘retool’ their narratives into something radically different from that which the audience desires” (1992b, p. 24). In the case of Transformers, it seems as though fans who expected the film to repeat the narrative from earlier Transformers narratives (such as the TV-series, comic books and animated film) were more critical in their evaluations of the film (again, as imagined through the trailer-video) and thereby the producers’ artistic decisions, than were fans who regarded the film as a new continuity within the franchise. In what follows below, I shall conclude my analysis of the fan talk on the announcement video by providing some further insights into the admittedly very ambivalent fan-producer relationship.

Popular culture literacy: Awareness of the producer’s intentions

To begin with, many of the fans on the TFW2005 forum showed signs of popular culture literacy in their decoding of the contents of the actual or imagined announcement video. To speak with Liebes and Katz (1993) again, they proved to be critical readers in two major respects. In the first threads about the announcement video, this competence was revealed in the fans’ visions of what the video would be like, in terms of, for example, footage or narrative elements. When imagining the content of the yet-to-be-released promotional video, the fans tended to rely on previously accumulated knowledge on how these types of videos are typically constructed, genre competence, and on previously announced information about the film project as a whole. In addition, the fans predicted the content of video by drawing parallels to promotional videos connected to similar franchises, such as The Hulk, War of the Worlds, King Kong, Godzilla, Lord of the Rings, Spiderman, X-Men, Harry Potter, Terminator and Star Wars. These franchise texts, then, came to serve as intertexts in the fan talk, used as referents to make sense of the anticipated announcement video. Keeping with the terminology provided by Liebes and Katz (1993), this line of critical reading – in which references were made to genre conventions and formulae – can be said to have taken mainly a syntactic form.

Beyond this, the fans also exposed knowledge of the producers’ and the marketers’ strategies for selling the new film. In speculating about the content
of the yet-not-released announcement video, some fans relied upon their previous knowledge about the traditional teaser video format to make informed calculations. Most notably, these fans were clear about the intentions of promotional videos to create awareness and preferably also “buzz”, which suggests that the fans also engaged in the form of pragmatic critical decoding that earlier quotes can be seen as evidence of. As one fan remarked: “Teasers aren’t meant to give the gist of what the movie is about, that’s what the trailers do. A teaser is just to let people know that there is a movie” (P45.2, 2006, June 18). A similar comment was offered by another forum member, who recognized that “The entire point is to get the buzz started. And there will be a buzz. When that trailer hits, listen to the crowd in the theater. They will all be ‘buzzing’” (P46.1, 2006, May 16).

Also in the discussions about the producers’ main target group for the 2007 film, many fans revealed similar understandings of the producers’ chief intentions. While disputes on the matter did exist, quite many fans were convinced that the companies involved, including Hasbro, were more eager to please the mainstream audience than the fandom. Or, in the words of one fan, to “broaden Transformers’ appeal beyond mostly kids” (P43.7, 2007, July 7). While many fans seem to have been humble about their own perceived importance to brand owner Hasbro and the franchise at large, others recognized that the fans do constitute a valuable niche market, open to more specialized toy lines. As held by one fan, for instance: “Collectors are not driving the Transformers brand. Not by any stretch. They are, however, driving much of the side product Hasbro releases (Alternators etc). Logically, Hasbro must see a significant collector fanbase (20%) to try that” (P15.7, 2006, July 7). Still others acknowledged the fans’ value as loyal consumers, who, in the words of Meehan “can be counted on to purchase objects connected to the product line’s title” (2000, p. 83). As one fan explained, for example, the fandom makes up “a steady source of income” or a “buffer” for Hasbro (P48.7, 2006, July 8). In important respects, such fan discourse resonates with earlier presented statements from my focus group interviews, which also recognized the value of fan consumption to companies.

Furthermore, some fans seem to have recognized the producers’ attention to the fans’ preferences – for example through the Don Murphy forum – as nothing more than “disrespectful” attempts on the part of the producers to manage, or as these fans write, “handle” the fandom:

*We have high standards and won’t accept anything that’s thrown our way. I realized that when someone mentioned that the Hollywood types thought they could “handle” the fandom. That’s just disrespectful. Not cuz I think I am entitled, but because they take our intelligence for granted. […] I want a great story that keeps my attention with producers who respect the source material* (P49.8, 2006, July 1).
Like it or not this fandom’s been handled from the start. I noticed it LONG AGO. Have you ever read Murphy’s board, he know just what to say to placate his posters (P13.8, 2006, July 2).

As exemplified also by the latter quote, some forum members specifically claimed to have revealed that the producers’ communication of information with the fandom was calculated; a means to either trigger or strangle debate. Similar recognitions came in the shape of commentaries such as: “Rumors have no solid ground plus those rumors like many others were just created and circulated to rile fans” (P13.8, 2006, July 2), or “I’ve come to feel that, since Don Murphy has become so jaded & cryptic in the way he interacts with the fandom, anything that he says is true is usually said to shut people up” (P6.6, 2006, June 29). Other fans seem to have come to terms with the producers’ readiness to accommodate fan wishes as a further indication of strategic fan management. In the view of some, apparently, the producers’ considerations of fan preferences – here in regard to the voice-acting debate – were primarily a tactic to “shake off” demanding fans: “I think that Bay tried to “shake” the fans off his back by auditioning Cullen. If they wanted Cullen for the role they would cast him on the spot” (P37.8, 2006, July 2).

Thus, as suggested by the self-reflective statements above, fans on TFW2005 were far from ignorant about the producers’ possible intentions with, for example, the portioning out of information about the film project little by little at the time. As recognized by some fans, this “information scarcity-tactic”, as we might call it, would have served the producers’ interest by keeping the fans happy yet at the same time curious about the anticipated film. That some of the fans acknowledged that a fandom like Transformers might be “handled” by the companies involved further implies that the fans, or some of them at least, were wary of the producers’ fan management endeavors.

Fan power: Legal versus imagined ownership

As indicated earlier, the fan talk spurred by the announcement video also tended to involve discussions about the implications of a Hollywood live action film on the Transformers franchise at large. Within the frames of these discussions, many fans voiced concerns that the film would bring – in their minds – unwelcome changes to the established fictional world. It would, as commonly expressed, be adjusted to the mainstream audience rather than to the fandom and thereby run against the “basic premises” of the Transformers fiction. The debate among the fans regarding the film’s potential impact on the franchise was carried out over several pages on the forum, and, to a fairly high degree, this debate seems to have sprung out of a question that one of the fans formulated in this way: “how far does a change have to stray before it becomes offensive, and com-
pletely misses the whole point of the original franchise?’ (P42.6, 2006, June 30). In the context of these discussions, some of the fans uttered statements which breathed feelings of *powerlessness vis-à-vis* the producers involved with the film project. A case in point is the following fan who, in a critique of the design of the robot featured in the announcement video, wrote: “I don’t like that look, personally. I don’t like the way it looks on Transformers and it’s not familiar to me as a fan. […]. But I’m not in control of the film, so I can’t change it, obviously” (P6.6, 2006, June 29).

Thus, as expressed in the last line of this quote, this fan believed him- or herself to have very *limited influence* over the film’s actual content. Similar concerns were expressed by other fans also, as certain strands of the fan talk about the announcement video came to grow into a wider discussion about the fans’ potential to influence the film project. Among the more reluctant fans on the TFW2005 forum, voices were raised that the producers failed to attend to the fandom’s interests. As voiced by one fan, for example: “In the end, they do what they want …so why even ask us? Personally, I feel a little like we were sold one bag of goods….but will receive another when all is said and done. […]” (P42.8, 2006, July 9). Other fans, however, argued that the communication with the producers had failed only because some fans “*misinterpreted*” the invitation from the producers and “overestimated” their possibilities to have a say about the film’s content (P52.8, 2006, July 1). This debate, in turn, can be related to the sometimes very heated discussions about the film’s place in the wider *Transformers* world. The posts below were both parts of a dialogue between several fans about the look of the robots in the video, and as evident, there was quite a lot of controversy within the fan community as to whether the live action film would take the franchise in the “right” or “wrong” “direction”:

*I’m afraid that the makers of this movie are taking it in the wrong direction* (P5.6, 2006, June 30).

*You can’t apply terms like right direction and wrong direction to something like this because at the end of the day there is no direction other than what Hasbro chooses for its property* (P38.6, 2006, June 30).

As apparent, the last writer especially expressed a feeling of not having any real influence on the *Transformers* text since it, in the end of the day, remains a Hasbro “property”. Interestingly, the issue of *ownership*, which was undoubtedly addressed in the above comment, would return as a topic of discussion in the fan talk analyzed. In particular, the matter surfaced in a thread started by a fan who obviously was interested in finding out why so many fans – according to his or her own observations – were suspicious of the announcement video and
ultimately the film itself: “I’m curious. There are people on various websites that are all about hating the TEASER, hating everything to do with anything that’s been released regarding the movie. My question is WHY?” (P28.8, 2006, June 30). One of the first commentators of this post provided further suggestions as to why so much detestation was directed at the video and the film project as a whole. As the writer proposed, the conflict was probably caused by the fact that certain fans consider Transformers to belong to them: “I don’t claim to know everything or understand why people act the way they do, but maybe it has something to do with the fact that something that is a hobby to many people “their” hobby, “their” toys the thing that “they” are into is about to go mainstream big time” (P18.8, 2006, June 30). Thus, the writer here suggests that at the roots of the often aired hatred laid a sense of lost exclusivity or ownership over the franchise among fans who tended to treat Transformers as “theirs”. This reasoning continued with the following lines by the same author:

Maybe it’s like when you have this great local or underground band that you really love, and you tell people about it all the time, tell them how cool they are, how much you enjoy them, it starts to feel like they are “your” band. People get this sense of entitlement. People feel like it’s “their” things, their cool little underground thing that only they and a select few are fans of… then they sign with a major label and everyone knows who they are. They are not cool anymore, they’re not “underground” anymore […]. Could this be at least part of what’s going on here with Transformers? Is Hollywood and Michael Bay and Don Murphy stomping all over “your” transformers, changing them, making them into “sellouts” if it were? (P18.8, 2006, June 30).

This writer was supported by others who had similar experiences of the fandom. Basically repeating the arguments from above, the writer of the following post clearly shared the same theory: “I think someone said it here, or another thread, but some people feel an ownership to the transformers, like it is our thing, don’t eff it up” (P53.8, 2006, July 6). Given these and similar statements offered on the TFW2005 forum then, the fan discussions about the film project highlight the notions of “shared” (Shefrin, 2004, p. 273) or “partial” (Gray, 2010, p. 165) ownership. To recapture what was stressed in my theoretical framework, while copyright and intellectual property laws secure the brand owner’s legal ownership over a property like Transformers, fans also tend to develop a sense of possession over their objects of fandom (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; Shefrin, 2004; Russo, 2009; Gray, 2010). As evident in the fan talk, while hardly any fans explicitly claimed any ownership over Transformers themselves, many observed that there was a general tendency within the fandom to treat the property as “theirs”. Then, when the film makers made decisions about the film which were discrepant with the fans’ ambitions with “their” text, conflicting interests were clearly voiced on the forum. With legal rights over the Transformers brand, the film companies proved themselves powerful enough to change the conditions
for the fan talk. By, for example, requesting that unsanctioned material was re-
moved from the forum, they thereby set the limits to what could and could not
be talked about on the board. As “partial owners” to the Transformers brand,
parts of the fan community voiced that they expected influence on the film pro-
ject. Some fans held the fandom itself as responsible for the failed communica-
tion with the film team, while others acknowledged the producers’ efforts to
communicate with the fans as nothing more than attempts to control the fan-
dom.

8.4 Spreading the word: A fan blog’s contribution to the ‘Sector Seven’
experience

My analysis of the fan talk about the announcement video makes evident that
paratextual fan productivity can be both supportive and challenging vis-à-vis of-
official paratexts. Sandvoss, thus, seems to be correct in his observation that
“media professionals and audiences now share communicative spaces offering
sometimes conflicting paratexts” (2011, p. 75, my emphasis). Merely through its
release, the announcement video created much buzz on the TFW2005 forum
and elsewhere. Within the context of the previously covered ‘Sector Seven’
campaign, the fans were explicitly encouraged to “spread the word” about the
campaign/mystery and to add their own contributions to it. As made manifest
in the proceeding chapter, the campaign comprised a particularly ‘producerly’
(Fiske, 1997b) paratext, in that it established a lot of puzzling “gaps” for the
fans to fill in through transmedial reading. Given this, it is perhaps not surpris-
ing to see that the campaign triggered an interest among the fans to “excorpo-
rate” the mystery into various types of fan productivity. In this section, I com-
plete my analysis of the campaign by tracing its flows into one particular online
community – a fan-driven blog called the Live Action Transformers Movie Blog.
This is done with the ambition of deepening our understanding of the relation-
ship between official and unofficial paratexts in today’s worlds of transmedial
entertainment and, by extension, between producers and consumers of these
worlds.

Apart from constituting another example in this thesis of the enunciative fan
productivity that was spurred by the arrival of the 2007 Transformers film, the
results from my analysis suggest that the fan blog – as a largely supportive unofficial paratext – came to contribute to the ‘Sector Seven’ experience. As the cam-
paign proceeded, and as new installments of the SectorSeven.org website were
made available, the blog would prove itself one of the most enthusiastic follow-
ers of the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery. It developed into a source rich in information
about the campaign, keeping its readers aware of significant updates through
news posts on the subject. In the comments to these informative posts, the promotion/game was given further attention. Ultimately, the fan blog contributed to the spatial expansion of the campaign – and the overall Transformers brand experience – by constituting yet another platform on which it could operate.

If the fan talk about the announcement video constituted an ambivalent type of unofficial paratext, given its both critical and supportive contents, the fan blog’s coverage of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience appeared to have been more markedly in line with the producers’ ambitions. Without being the result of an actual collaboration between producers and fans, the blog could – in relation to this subject at least – be regarded as a voluntary companion to the campaign organizers. As indicated below, the blog potentially contributed to the ‘Sector Seven’ marketing initiative in at least three distinguishable yet highly intertwined ways: 1) by acting as a provider of information about campaign developments, 2) by providing an arena for collective intelligence to the campaign followers, and 3) by promoting the campaign as well as the commodities and paratexts on which it relied. As is suggested below, these three ways of contributing can be understood with the help of the taxonomy for fan talk developed by Bielby and Harrington (1995) and Staiger (2005, p. 107ff).

8.4.1 The blog as provider of information: Diffusion

The first blog post on the subject announced the URL-address to the SectorSeven.org website as well as the first password necessary to enter the site. All in all, the blog constituted a valuable source of information for fans participating in the promotion/game experience, and especially for those who had not stumbled upon the passwords yet. In due course, all eight passwords to the SectorSeven.org website had been revealed on the blog, along with more or less detailed descriptions of the updates that each new code gave access to. Sometimes, but not always, the blog made known the contexts in which the passwords were hidden. In general, the revelation of a password came with detailed information about the new content that the code made accessible and clues about where on the website it could be found. Information about new updates and discoveries on the website was also posted in-between password-releases. This could, for instance, be the case when the blogger himself had made a new finding on the website or, as in the case below, when new information reached him from other sources:

From the Stop Sector Seven site comes a report of a link on the Sector Seven site that seems to be an audio message from Starscream. The information came from “C0d3x” via an email. As a password it doesn’t work on the S7 site. […] In checking the “Informants”
Along with this news post was also a direct link to the audio file that it reported on, as well as a suggested transcription of the recorded message from film character “Starscream”. The information about the audio file allegedly came from the BuzzNet-website. In other cases, the news originated from the blog readers, as in the revelation of the password to the fan-made Vector-Sigma website:

Thanks to site reader Lorenzo P., the password for the Vector-Sigma.org site has been discovered. The site was discovered as a result of the new Sector Seven password where one of the harddrives contained a screenshot of the site. The password is MEGAMAN and the site is case sensitive. Or you can click here for direct access (2007, May 20).

As another service to the readers, the blog occasionally also summarized the current situation with the ‘Sector Seven’ experience, for example by providing a full list of the passwords or detailed descriptions of the actual content of SectorSeven.org up to a certain point in time. Thus, for fans interested in the ‘Sector Seven’ promotion/game, reading the blog’s news posts on passwords, updates and discoveries would have proven helpful. Through diffusion (Bielby & Harrington, 1995; see also Staiger, 2005, p. 107ff) of this kind of information – and of direct links to relevant contents – the blog ultimately constituted an unofficial paratext potentially facilitating the users’ encounters with the official, campaign paratext.

8.4.2 The blog as arena for collective intelligence: Request, speculation and recognition

Already with respect to what has been mentioned above, it would be legitimate to suggest that the Transformer Live Action Movie Blog constituted an arena for collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997; Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b). However, the term gains even greater significance when one considers the blog as a space for requests and speculation; as an arena where questions related to the campaign’s content could be asked and potentially answered through collective interpretations by the fans (Bielby & Harrington, 1995; see also Staiger, 2005, p. 107ff). The commentary function on the blog, not least, provided such an arena. For, if the news post on the blog provided clues about the content on SectorSeven.org and related material, the readers’ commentaries gave further advice on how to make the best of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience. As exemplified by the quote below, the readers communicated more or less explicit counsel on how to make use of the SectorSeven.org website:

If you read the PDF from John Ho, you can see that the satellite views relate to North Korean, European and Asian Peninsula activity, as a mention is made to accessing such data
The fans, thus, used the blog as a channel to communicate their own discoveries in regard to the Sector Seven mystery and to share these with other blog followers. Often, the commentaries concerned details which had not been acknowledged in the news posts. In other cases, the commentaries were direct answers to questions lifted in the news posts. In one of the news posts (from March 1, 2007), for example, the writer expressed uncertainty concerning the term ‘NBE’ and what it meant in the Sector Seven context. The post requested “ideas” from the readers on how to interpret the term, and several fellow fans soon provided their guesses or informed answers. Other requests were made in the commentary field itself. Many of these concerned the password hunt and typically took the following forms: “The password doesn’t seem to be working… Did you make a typo?” (Pc, 2007, March 1), “where do we access newly revealed passwords for the site?” (Anonymous, 2007, March 4), or “What’s the current password for the sector7 website? I seem to have deleted it out of my history” (Anonymous, 2007, April 24). Hence, to the extent that the news posts themselves did not provide sufficient information in regard to the passwords, the readers turned to each other for additional details.

Other questions raised in the commentary field concerned the ‘Sector Seven’ narrative per se. Reflections were, for example, made on how to understand videos, audio files or other contents uploaded on SectorSeven.org. Sharing between the users were then various suggestions on how to actually interpret or decode the narrative details provided within the frames of the campaign. In addition, the emails connected to the ‘Sector Seven’ experience resulted in a great deal of concerns on the blog. When the fans first understood that “underground” emails were being sent to some of them, speculations inevitably surfaced – not least in regard to how the email-addresses had been collected. In the first news post about these mysterious emails, caused by the release of the third password in a message from Agent X, the following suggestion was made:

In an email sent to various Transfans on the web, most of who don’t know how their email addresses were captured, comes a new password for the Sector Seven website. I am thinking the emails were captured from users on various Transformers forums that allowed their email addresses to be public. Take a intern, give em five Transformer forum and an hour and I am sure they could have culled up a sizable email list to distribute for “Agent X” (News post, 2007, March 5).

Thus, to the post writer it would not be too far-fetched to assume that big film projects like Transformers engaged marketers to infiltrate fan communities in
search of personal information in order to target-market these groups. In a later news post, dealing also with personalized emails to specific fan addresses, the post writer made a similar assumption, followed by a warning to the readers: “I am also thinking that sending these emails will help them add entries to their database so they can send you future info from “Agent X” and other advertisements once the Transformers campaign ends, so be aware of that possibility” (News post, 2007, March 25).

As suggested by the quoted posts – and indeed by the blog’s engagement with the subject per se – the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign demanded collaborative efforts among the fans to be understood. The blog provided the campaign followers with space for circulating meanings and understandings related to the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery. As an arena for the communicating of collective interpretations and intertextual knowledge then, the blog not only became a valuable source of information about the campaign but also a particular interpretive community within the Transformers fandom (cf. Jenkins, 1992b; Liebes & Katz, 1993; Gray, 2010). Offered within such a community was also, as exemplified by some of the quotes above, the opportunity for some fans to present their knowledge on, or recognition of, the Transformers brand to fellow, less cognizant, fans (Staiger, 2005, p. 108).

8.4.3 The blog as promoter: Commentary and diffusion

As with the announcement video, a fairly large portion of the news posts and readers’ posts on the blog consisted of commentary; that is, in evaluative statements or opinions about the subject at hand (Bielby & Harrington, 1995; see also Staiger, 2005, p. 107ff). While – in contrast to the fan talk about the announcement video – far from all posts included positive exclamations, few actually expressed negative attitudes towards the campaign. Instead, the blog was rich in posts which expressed different degrees of elation over the overall campaign or its contents. Indeed, the big amount of attention given to the promotion/game on the blog alone can be taken as sufficient evidence of the fans’ appreciation of the paratext. However, through specific statements delivered in the news posts as well as in the commentary field, the fans’ satisfaction

36 While I can neither confirm nor deny the possibility that the professionals behind the ‘Sector Seven’ experience did “lurk” the fan communities in search of personal email-addresses, other fans pointed out that the email-addresses were actually provided by the fans themselves. This supposedly happened when they responded to the email-addresses that had been revealed on the ‘Sector Seven’ website.

37 When criticism did occur, it tended to be directed at decisions taken in the context of the film production (for example in regards to the choice of voice actors or the robot designs), rather than at the ‘Sector Seven’ experience as such.
with the experience becomes even more apparent. The following commentator, for example, voices his enthusiasm with the marketing initiative:

WOOW WOOW WOOW!! Remember, remember the 27th of March....um yeah. Wow, today is nothing short of new transformers info and I’m loving it! I love this disinformation campaign that sector seven is running and I love Agent X. If you haven’t subscribed to his podcast via iTunes (it’s free) you should. [...] Check it out. So far, I’m a super big fan of this marketing campaign. Talk about synergy! (Anonymous, 2007, March 27).

As indicated by certain statements offered on the blog, the campaign – as the announcement video – managed to build anticipation among the fans. Evidently, fans appreciated the storytelling function of the paratext which rendered it a “back-story” (Anonymous, 2007, March 4) to the film yet also a “continuing drama” (News post, 2007, April 4) or a “game” of its own: “This ‘game’ is awesome!! Definitely fueling the fire for July 4th” (Anonymous, 2007, March 25).

Interestingly, fans seem to have appreciated the ‘Sector Seven’ experience not only as an exciting game to play while waiting for the film to finally be released, but also as an extraordinary marketing initiative. For, while the continuing ‘Sector Seven’ mystery could be regarded as a game sophisticated enough to work as an entertainment experience on its own, more or less independently of the film, many of the fans seem to have kept the promotional purpose in mind even when deeply engaged with the password hunting and puzzle solving. The following quote reveals an attitude, apparently shared by quite many fans, that the ‘Sector Seven’ experience stood out compared to other movie marketing campaigns: “The updates from the Sector 7 site are continuing in frequency, should be interesting how the story of the site is developed. […] For a site that’s designed to promote a movie, whoever is doing it is doing an outstanding job of making it worth following (News post, 2007, March 5). Or, as another fan had it: “I have to say, this is the sweetest marketing campaign I have ever seen (Pc, 2007, April 3). As these and the following commentaries also exemplify, several fans expressed an appreciation for the innovative character of the campaign design. Some fans specifically praised the “genius” (Pf, 2007, April 22) who had come up with the campaign or endorsed the “creativity” (News post, 2007, February 5) or the “very unique and different direction” (Anonymous, 2007, March 5) that the campaign was evidence of.

A part from hyping the campaign as such, the blog can also be claimed to have promoted other elements of the 2007 movie verse by acknowledging the ways in which the experience went beyond the SectorSeven.org website. It was concluded in my related analysis of the actual content of the campaign that much of this, in more or less obvious ways, found its way into other Transformers commodities or marketing platforms. On top of apparent connections to the upcoming movie, it was for example remarked that the ‘Sector Seven’ experi-
ence linked to the official movie prequel comic book. The strongest link was of course created through the inclusion of one of the passwords in this publication. Apart from this, however, the fans also acknowledged that the campaign (and most notably the SectorSeven.org website) and the prequel shared some fundamental narrative elements. In other words, and as this quote below exemplifies, the prequel was acknowledged as a helpful intertextual tool for fans trying to make sense of the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery: “Simmons is referred to in the Official Prequel novel of Ghost of Yesterday. […] It’s a pretty cool book and explains why the Autobots have an affinity for humans” (Pg, 2007, April 21). In addition to this, the fans also recognized connections between the campaign’s contents and the footage in the announcement trailer that was released in late June, 2006. Through these and similar acknowledgements of the various ingredients of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, the Transformers Live Action Movie Blog must be acknowledged as having constituted an alternative route into the campaign experience. Not only did it potentially hype the campaign itself, with the SectorSeven.org website being its key nod; it also contributed to the diffusion of references to related elements within the 2007 movie verse (Bielby & Harrington, 1995; see also Staiger, 2005, p. 107ff). Against this background then, it can be claimed that the blog potentially contributed to the ‘Sector Seven’ experience promotionally.

8.4.4 The ‘Sector Seven’ experience: Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign offered the fans opportunities for meaningful pursuits while waiting for the release of the Transformers film to which it was connected. The writings on the Transformers Live Action Movie Blog make evident that it constituted more than a conventional marketing initiative; it made up a mystery complex enough to encourage collective efforts and interpretations among the fans. Through its delicate design, with pieces of information spread out across a rather encompassing landscape of media and content platforms, it is not surprising to discover that the fans took pleasure in following the promotion/game. Following Gray then, the campaign reminds us that even “peripheral” (2010, p. 5) marketing elements, commonly dismissed as simply commercialism, must be treated seriously by media researchers.

Moreover, in addition to the enjoyable experience of trying to complete a multifaceted story-puzzle, the campaign also provided an alternative and, fair to say, exclusive source of information and news about the anticipated Transformers film. As opposed to more conventional publicity (in the form of, for example, press coverage or news posts on various websites), the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign urged its followers to “dig out” the details themselves rather than having the
information presented in a more straightforward and perhaps less “clever” manner. In short, with the campaign, the fans became acknowledged and ultimately awarded for constituting a “particularly active” (Jenkins, 1992b) consumer group. Borrowing from Nikunen, the campaign can ultimately be claimed to have encouraged a “fanatification” (2007, p. 111) of the cinema-going audiences by expecting a fan mode of reception. All of this needs to be recognized when seeking an understanding of the fans’ interest in the campaign.

However, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign also supports the idea that a paratext’s power to create enjoyment potentially adds to its promotional value. Certainly, if the ‘Sector Seven’ mystery had been less intriguing, causing less consumer engagement and thereby less “buzz”, it would arguably have been less successful as a marketing effort. Now on the other hand, the complex design of the mystery seems to have worked well, if possibly only among the most dedicated fans. As acknowledged also by Meehan (2000), marketing needs to be made fun in order to result in fan engagement. As things were, the Transformers Live Action Movie Blog – without any known support or incitements offered by the professional producers – took on the role as a provider of information about the mysterious campaign, developed into an arena for collective intelligence about the subject, and served to promote the campaign itself as well as related commodities and paratexts. In this context, it must also be acknowledged that even though possibly only a small fraction of the potential movie-goers were actually active on the blog during the campaign, due to the existence of “lurkers” the actual number of readers can be expected to have been significantly higher.

Thus, even if it was done without any promotional purpose, the fan talk on the blog did “spread the word” – just as they were encouraged to by the mysterious ‘Agent X’. In the next chapter, I will go into a deepened theoretical discussion about these connections between pleasure and work that the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign can be claimed to have relied upon for its success as a participatory marketing initiative – and which other parts of my analyzed data have also shown. Before moving there, however, I shall conclude this chapter by presenting the results of an additional analysis of fan-made paratexts created in relation to the 2007 Transformers film; results which will also inform my discussions in the subsequent chapter.

8.5 Fans as ‘para-textual poachers’: Fan appropriations of official promotional videos

As suggested by my analysis of the fan talk carried out in relation to the announcement video as well as of the blog posts on the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, fans anticipating the 2007 Transformers film readily excorporated elements from
the official film marketing campaign and used it as a basis for enunciative productivity. Rather than passively and quietly awaiting a film that was still several months from being released, members of the fandom occupied themselves with the paratextual material provided to them at a particular point in time. This certainly corresponds to Grossberg’s recognition that “Audiences are constantly making their own cultural environment from the cultural resources that are available to them” (1992, p. 53). Judging by the forum commentaries and blog posts, both the promotional video and the viral campaign were read by fans as important elements of the emergent 2007 movie verse.

In this last section of this chapter, I provide additional insights into fan ex-corporations practices in relation to the 2007 film and thereby also into the relationship between the official and the unofficial versions of the movie verse. These insights are derived from my analysis of a certain type of textual fan productivity, or to be correct, para-textual fan productivity. More specifically, they results from an analysis of two fan-made trailer videos which were launched on YouTube prior to respectively during the film’s theatrical run. By placing these videos in relation to the official trailer videos which were released in support of the 2007 film, it becomes possible, again, to address the question of the place of unofficial paratexts within the Transformers world in general and the promotional web built around the film in particular. In addition to this, the commentaries offered in relation to each of the videos – made by the creators themselves as well as by viewers – provide us with more clues about the relationship between the professional producers and consumers in the context of the 2007 movie verse.

In significant aspects, such as content, length and faithfulness to the studio produced trailer videos, the two analyzed videos differ. The first video analyzed constitutes the Transformers fan-made trailer video which, to date, has attracted the most views on YouTube. As of December 22, 2011, it had been viewed 703,757 times (which, importantly, does not mean that the same number of unique individuals have seen the video). The second video had received a significantly lower number of “views”, 15,264, at the same point in time. As stressed also in my methods chapter, I would in no way claim these selected videos to be representative of the entire bulk of fan-made Transformers trailer videos that are available on YouTube or in other areas of the world wide web. Rather, the videos should be regarded as illustrating examples of what videos of this kind can look like. After a short description of each video, I make an attempt to assess the video’s relationship to the corporate raw material from which they were built.
8.5.1 The two videos: Brief descriptions

Trailer video no. 1: ‘Transformers trailer – Brand new cut April 2007’

The first fan-made trailer video included in my analysis of para-textual fan productivity was published on YouTube on April 2, 2007; hence almost exactly three months before the film’s theatrical release. The 0:43 minutes short video is a collage of four of the official promotional videos (including TV commercials) that had been released at that particular point in time. As with the professionally produced TV-spots, and significant parts of the lengthier trailer videos, the pace in the video is remarkably fast. Most of the scenes are but seconds long, or even shorter, and as opposed to the professionally produced videos, no textual information or speaking voices have been inserted to create order among the dispersed scenes or to guide the viewers’ interpretations of the content. Also due to this, the video contains no clear storyline, but rather illuminates various spectacular elements included in the official trailer videos, such as advanced special effects and computer graphics. The official videos have been edited so that the focus is almost exclusively on the robot characters, which means that the human characters are less visible in the video. Lead human character ‘Sam’ does appear quickly in the video, but other characters feature only as “background” in scenes featuring explosions or struggling robots.

Figure 8.1: Analyzed fan video no. 1. Built with clips from the official trailer videos, this fan-made video was mistaken for a professional product by some commentators.
New music has been added and the same score plays throughout the video. The music is dubbed over the dialogues, but other sounds such as explosions and robot transformations can be heard. Like the official trailer videos, the clip ends with textual elements such as the Transformers logotype, information about the film’s release date, reference to the official movie website, the logotypes of the involved companies (Paramount Pictures, DreamWorks and Hasbro), and the announcement that the film has “not yet been rated”. Included in the footage is also the scene, picked from the official teaser trailer video released in December 2006, in which the URL-address and password to the Sector Seven website are revealed.

Fan-made trailer video no. 2: ‘Transformers mashup trailer 1984 – 2007’

In terms of length as well as content, the second fan-made trailer is different from the one described above. This 2.50 minutes long video was uploaded on YouTube on July 11, 2007 and hence after the film had been released in most countries. While the first was edited from footage of the officially produced trailer videos, this one is completely composed of visuals from the 1980s animated cartoon. The sound, however, is almost exclusively taken from the trailer videos supporting the 2007 live action film. What the video does then is to merge, or “mashup”, the Transformers text from the 1980s with material connected to Michael Bay’s first film.

![Video]

Figure 8.2: Analyzed fan video no. 2. The second fan-video analyzed borrowed the audio track from official trailers, but mixed this with visuals from the 1980s cartoons.
Like many official trailer videos, this video begins with an announcement explaining that “The following preview has been approved for all audiences by the Motion Picture Association of America”. Also like the official trailer videos, but unlike the fan-made video described above, this one contains texted information. Apart from placing the various scenes into context, these elements also serve to slow down the video’s tempo. The following text appears throughout the video:

On July 4th
Our world
Will be transformed
Most have come to destroy us
Some have come to protect us
From the 1980s
And our childhood memories
Transformers

While most of these phrases are picked from the official videos, the lines “From the 1980s” and “And our childhood memories” are new to this video. The Transformers logotype at the end is styled in the 1980s fashion rather than cut and pasted from the trailer videos. In addition to this texted information, the video also includes the following speaking voices:

“Our enemy can take any shape”
“They could be anywhere”

Both of these lines are spoken by a character in the live action film, but feature in this video as voice-over lines. Unlike the fan-video described above, and the official videos, this one does not contain additional information, such as creative cast, release date, reference to the official movie website, and company logotypes.

8.5.2 The fan videos’ relationship to the official paratexts

In regard to online textual productivity in the age of media convergence, Sandvoss suggests that “the boundaries between industry and user generated content, between media institutions and their audiences, between fans and producers […] dissipate as fans operate as producers and media producers as fans” (2011, p. 67). Within most subcultural contexts, creative fans tend to “make do” with whatever industry material they have at hands (Hebdige, 1979/1988; Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b). This goes also for the two fan productions in focus here, as evident from the above descriptions. As a result of these excorporative processes, the borders between the amateur productions and
professional dittos indeed seem to become blurred the way Sandvoss suggests. However, depending on how much is “borrowed” from the system and how this is done, fan productions can be claimed to be more or less in line with the industry raw material. In what follows, I elaborate further on these issues by presenting the two fan videos as alternatives respectively replicas of the official trailer paratexts.

**Fan videos as ‘alternatives’ to official paratexts**

In important aspects, the two fan videos can be read as alternatives to the official trailer videos, providing the *Transformers* fandom and other audiences with additional images of the 2007 film. Indeed, the videos are no replicas of the professionally produced videos, but rather comprise mixes of footage and scenery from these and other productions within the *Transformers* franchise. They have been produced by people outside of the companies involved with the production and marketing of the 2007 film, and presumably for reasons other than those prompted by the companies. While the releases of the official videos did constitute significant events within the fandom (as evidences from my analysis of fan talk in relation to the announcement video) and while the videos themselves did trigger a lot of fan productivity, their main purpose was inescapably to advertise the upcoming *Transformers* film. What can be assumed, based on our previous understanding of fan productivity, is that the videos have been produced with significantly lower budgets than the videos included in the official film marketing campaign – if at any at all. Fan creativity is after all more often driven by enthusiasm than the promise of earning any money (cf. Baym, 2009; Wessels, 2011) and, while the professional trailer makers generally get paid for their work as contracted employees, it is most likely the case that neither of the fans received any financial rewards for their productions.

Moreover, the two fan videos were distributed on what can be perceived as alternative platforms; rather than running on national theaters in connection to some other big film production, the fan videos reached the public solely via user-sharing channels. While the fan videos premiered on the tremendously saturated YouTube website, and thus competed with millions of other videos for attention – user-generated and professionally produced – the official videos were given more exclusive space by being shown in conjunction with major cinema releases such as *Shrek the Third* (2006) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (2006), or on websites more or less dedicated to film in general or the *Transformers* film in particular (for example on Yahoo!Movies.com or on the official film website). Also on YouTube, the viewer ratings disclose the unequal

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fight for attention. Even the relatively popular fan trailer analyzed here, which by the end of 2011 had managed to attract more than 703,000 “views”, is in the shadows of the official trailer videos. In this context, we must also take into consideration that much amateur material (including commentaries) on YouTube and similar channels become removed under pressure from intellectual property owners, or for other reasons.

Certainly, the fact that the videos were made at all can be viewed as evidence of the creators’ wish to alter the already existing versions in some way. The creators’ own commentaries on YouTube support this interpretation. In relation to the first fan-made video, the maker provided the following brief motive for his work:

*The latest most updated Transformer trailer, including parts from all past 4 trailers and music in a completely new cut. I felt that the previous trailers didn’t use enough good movie music, so I decided to use ‘Lacrimosa’, by Immediate Music. Also, some fans say they don’t see enough of the Transformers in... No humans, no titles, no dialogue. Just pure unadulterated Transformer bashing action. Hope you enjoy.*

Thus, according to this announcement, the video maker wanted to provide the “fans” with an alternative to the official videos, by focusing more on the robot characters than on the humans. The ambition, hence, was “pure unadulterated Transformers bashing action”. Being exclusively based on footage from the professionally produced promotional videos, which in turn made use of the film’s actual content, this fan video’s power to present itself as an alternative to the official marketing can admittedly be questioned. Rather, as further argued below, in both content, style and format, the video showed much resemblance to the professional videos. However, as intended by the film maker, it showed no human characters from the film but all the more robots and action. The video thus prioritized action scenes featuring robots at the expense of other, potentially audience-broadening elements from the official videos. For example, the video maker has chosen not to include scenes disclosing the love affair between male lead character ‘Sam’ and female lead character ‘Mikaela’. While the hinting on this romantic subplot in the official trailer videos can be regarded as an attempt on behalf of the marketers to broaden the potential audience for the final film, the fan creators have not had to adjust to such ambitions. Neither did this video feature any texted information nor voice over; elements which, when inserted to the official videos, helped the viewer interpret the various clips as well as the film to come. Content-wise, then, the video can be claimed to have been produced for a more niched audience than the official videos. In addition to this, the maker of this fan video decided to add a new soundtrack to the clips – a
decision obviously triggered by the creator's own dissatisfaction with the official videos' lack of "enough good music".

The second fan video also came with a comment from the creator. This time, however, the information provided revealed little about the creator's intentions with the product except for an interest to combine "the best" from the official trailer videos with the classic cartoon from the 1980s: "Take the best thing from Michael Bay's Transformers movie -- the trailer -- and use it as the soundtrack for the G1 cartoon, and you get this movie". In terms of actual content, the second video inevitably comes across as more original in relation to the official videos than does the first. The video maker has clearly strived to combine the Transformers he knew as a child with one of the most recent incarnations of his text. He has made efforts to find content matches between the 1980s cartoon and the live action trailer videos. As a result of these efforts, the video relies on the official videos for its audio track -- including dialogues, sound effects and voice overs -- yet uses visuals from the 1980s animation. Remarkably, the creator has been able to find scenes from the cartoons which are almost identical with the ones featured in the trailer videos to the 2007 film, and which go well with the dialogue from the trailer videos. For instance, like the official trailer videos, the fan video contains scenes from a military base that comes under attack by unfriendly Transformers, scenes from inside 'Pentagon' and the 'Hoover Dam', and scenes featuring 'Sam' and 'Mikaela'. Dialogue featured in the official trailer videos has been matched with animated footage, and the creator has worked with lip-synchronization to make the content merge in a close to seamless manner. The end result of this is a "mash-up" fan trailer, which presents itself as a playful alternative to the studio videos. As with the first fan video, this production can be claimed to have been made with a narrower audience in mind than the official trailers, in that it communicates with the long-term fans more than any other group of viewers. One line inserted into the video makes this particularly evident: "From the 1980s -- And our childhood memories".

The viewer commentaries provided in relation to the fan videos on YouTube provide us with further insights into the videos' roles as alternative paratexts. Apparently, both of the videos triggered the viewers to make comparisons between those and the official versions. Judging by some of the comments offered in relation to the first fan video, several viewers seem to have appreciated it as a better alternative to the official trailers:

That is the coolest re-edited I've seen so far. Pretty awesome stuff! (C199.V1, 2007).

holy shit BETTER THAN THE REAL TRAILORS [sic!] (C237.V1, 2007).
Similar commentary was provided in relation to the second fan video. While some viewers were clearly unimpressed by the work, others were apparently more pleased with the fan-made video than with the film itself:

[*It really IS better than the real movie. [...] THIS trailer is “Transformers”. Michael Bay’s latest movie was “Giant Robots From Outer Space That Changed From One Form to Another (Neat, huh?)”* (C52.V2, 2007).

To sum, both fan videos contain elements which help establish them as alternatives to the professionally produced dittos. They are appropriations of the official trailer videos, composed of material produced by the industry, yet mixed together in new ways by non-professionals and distributed outside of the traditional mass media (including television and cinema). Parts of the viewer commentary seem to recognize the videos as “better” alternatives to the studio versions, although contrasting perspectives exist. However, as much as the two fan videos constitute alternatives to the official trailers, they can also be said to be reproductions of the corporate paratexts. The next section will therefore illuminate the iterative aspects of the fan videos.

**Fan videos as ‘replicas’ of official paratexts**

As remarked, the two fan videos differ in terms of the reuse of already existent content. Being based upon footage from the actual live action film – accessible via the various promotional videos – the first fan-made video was clearly more strongly connected to the film than the second video, which was visually built on imagery from the 1980s cartoon. It featured action loaded scenes from the film, including several of the leading robot characters, and thereby presented anticipating fans with much the same content clues as did the official trailer videos. For anyone unaware of the video’s background, it possibly came across as yet another studio released paratext. The inclusion in the video of certain elements, such as the *Transformers* logotype, information about the film’s release date, reference to the official film website, the logotypes of Paramount Pictures, DreamWorks and Hasbro, and the announcement that the film “has not yet been rated”, would have rendered such interpretations feasible.

Indeed, some of the viewer commentaries reveal that this fan creation was in fact mistaken for a professional production. The following commentator was clearly surprised to find that the video maker was sprung out of the *Transformers*...
fandom: “This was made by a fan? If so, the promotional company should look into him or her. Very well done!” (C202.V1, 2007). Clearly, this particular commentator put this fan-made video on par with those initiated by the film companies. Others made similar interpretations of the video, and the following remark discloses that fans even recognized the video’s potential promotional value: “What’s funny is: there’s like thousands of these homemade trailers and millions of ppl watch them, the ppl that made the movie have got to be happy about all this, it’s free advertisement! Good job BTW” (C224.V1, 2007). In relation to this, some even suggested that the creator should ask for a financial reward for his efforts with the video: “GREAT TRAILER. YOU SHOULD BE PAID!” (C201.V1, 2007). Statements such as these certainly indicate a blurring of boundaries between professional and amateur-made media content, and actualize the question – to be further discussed in the subsequent chapter – of the value of users’ cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to the actors of the entertainment industry.

While some viewers, as shown, were positive about the video’s resemblance to the officially produced versions, others took this resemblance as evidence of the video maker’s dishonest ambitions. As revealed from comments such as this one, there were those who accused the video maker of purposely trying to deceive people into thinking that the video was actually professionally produced: “it’s unfortunate that the people who worked to put the trailers together, have people like [fan maker’s pseudonym, author’s note] trying to deceive ppl into thinking his trailers are the true ones” (C165.V1, 2007). A similar complaint by the same commentator was formulated the following way:

Is this the latest Transformers movie trailer, April 2007? NO, this is actually yet another bullshit fan-made trailer that tries to promote itself as the official trailer, you’ve obviously decided to be deceptive and i hope this gets pulled for terms violation or the filmmakers sue u, for this reason (C165, 2007).

Perhaps because the second fan-made video was so different from the officially produced versions, with animated scenes as opposed to live action dittos, that video caused no confusion in terms of creator identity. Indeed, with animated cartoon replacing the live action footage, this video does present itself as a particularly creative and well-synchronized appropriation of the official trailer videos. Nonetheless, even this video develops the same content, in a high degree. Since it has actually been structured with the official audio tracks as a guideline, it is not surprising to find that themes and plot-lines from the official videos to a large extent establish themselves here too. For example, the informative content of this video does, like the official promotional videos, disclose that an alien species has landed on planet Earth. With the help of textual information, such as the lines Some have come to protect us and Most have come to destroy us, the
viewers are offered insights into the basic plot premise of the film. Also, unlike the first fan-made video, which featured almost no humans at all, the second video does leave a relatively big amount of space to the animated equivalents of ‘Sam’ and ‘Mikaela’. Unlike the official versions, however, no clues are really given about the romantic relationship that develops in the actual film.

In terms of sound, noises from transforming robots, explosions, and vehicles dominate this second video, and a music score is added only roughly a minute into the video. The instrumental music then playing is borrowed from the official trailer videos. Also borrowed is the introduction to the video, which claims that the video has “approved for all audiences by the Motion Picture Association of America”. It can be expected that this fan video has not at all been evaluated by the industry organizations, but is merely intended to imitate the official trailer versions. Indeed, with an opening such as this, the fan video is given a “professional” character.

Possibly due to the fan videos’ close relationship to the official trailer paratexts, they also provoked some similar reactions from the viewers. As told earlier in this chapter, the announcement trailer video created much anticipation with the fans on the TFW2005 forum. Especially the first of the fan videos analyzed managed to achieve the same effect, as evident from viewer commentaries offered in relation to the clip:

I CANNOT wait for this movie:) (C170.V1, 2007).
Can’t wait!! Best trailer! (C198.V1, 2007).

is jus shit myself man, this film looks awesome. can’t wait :-p (C160.V1, 2007).

It’s gonna be an awesome movie!!! Thank god they let spielberg direct it!!! (C144.V1, 2007).

I’ve been waiting 20 years for this film! (C208.V1, 2007).

this shit is good! u made me want to see the movie right now! (C259.V1, 2007).

Hence, the hyping potential of this fan video at least seems to have been comparable to that of the official trailer paratexts. As the official paratexts though, both fan-made videos provoked some more or less intense discussions among the viewers concerning the film’s potential faithfulness to the older Transformers lore. As such they both provided, to speak with Gray (2010), yet other interpretative frameworks for the film in particular and to the Transformers world in general. Among other things, the videos had the viewers speculate about the characters in the upcoming film, the logic behind certain plot details, or the possible links to previous Transformers texts. The following comment was, for example, provoked by the first fan-made video:
transformers have always been awesome, but the look of them in this movie is strange and I expected better. They look more insectoid than big square transformers. Also, the movie doesn’t look like its based around the actual transformers per say, it looks like its based around that chick and dude trying to escape the carnage and destruction of the battles between the decepticons and the autobots. Plus it doesn’t look like the transformers are going to talk either which would be a let down (C148.V1, 2007).

The commentary field in relation to the second fan video gave room to similar evaluating statements:

After watching a lot of G1 and becoming a huge TF fan, the movie has sadly migrated to my ‘movies that should have been awesome but weren’t’ list. The main reason is simply, not enough transformers. I mean, after G1, you get attached to individual Autobots and Decepticons. You want to see a movie about THEM. The hacker girl, the annoying sector 7 guy, and the soldiers could probably have been cut out to make room for the bots. This trailer makes me smile. Thanks for that : ) (C49.V2, 2007).

These and similar commentaries suggest that the fan-made videos, like the officially produced versions, managed to spur anticipation and hype for the 2007 film as well as doubts and fears about the finished film’s possible loyalty to older Transformers texts. It is perhaps not so strange to see that the second video in particular, comprising a bricolage of audio visual elements from the 1980s cartoon and the first live action film, evoked commentaries about the relationship between the two textual components. Both videos, along with the official versions, seem to have served as ventilators by which the fans got yet other chances to talk about the 2007 film – in positive and negative terms.

It can be concluded, then, that both fan productions have been too reliant on the material offered by the official videos to give space to alternative themes or plot-lines. In these particular cases, the creators’ personal imprints are mainly displayed in the weight given to different already existent themes (for example, the focus on robots at the expense of human characters) and in the expressions used (most notably the use of animated footage instead of live action scenery). As suggested by viewer commentaries offered in relation to both videos, even fan creations like these may trigger similar reactions as officially produced paratexts. The implications for the producer-consumer relationship of this circumstance, as of others pointed to in this chapter, are assessed within the frames of my next chapter that deals specifically with the issue of power.

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This chapter has provided insights of various sorts into *Transformers* as a particular participatory culture, cared for by the fandom yet also encouraged by the companies involved with the production and marketing of the first live action *Transformers* film. In the next, synthesizing chapter, I draw on the knowledge provided in this and the previous chapter to deepen my analysis of the producer-consumer relationship as it comes across within the context of the 2007 *Transformers* movie verse. A special focus rests on the notions of *pleasure*, *resistance* and *exploitation* as I seek to clarify the complexity of this relationship.
9 Assessing the issue of power: Transformers and convergence culture

In the two preceding chapters, the transmedial world of entertainment developed under the brand name *Transformers* was presented both as a strategically built property, designed to generate profits through synergistic links between different elements within the franchise and thereby also a flow of consumers between product categories and media platforms, and as an object of fandom, built and expanded also by dedicated consumers through various kinds of fan productivity. This presentation was based on my empirical data, generated primarily through interviews with professionals, focus group interviews with fans, text analyses of strategic documents, marketing and fan-generated content, and through analyses of naturally occurring data, in the form of online fan talk. The purpose of this chapter is first and foremost to synthesize the contents of these two chapters, by relating the empirical data more clearly to the previously developed theoretical perspectives and concepts. With only minor exceptions, this chapter introduces no new data, but rather adds yet another layer of theory to the data presented in Chapter 7 and 8 of this thesis. This aims to make manifest the value of conducting a full-circuit study of the complex relationships between producers, texts and consumers which are established within contemporary entertainment franchises such as the one studied here.

The focus of the chapter is on the intricate relationships between the ‘official’ and the ‘unofficial’ versions of *Transformers* and between the presumably ambivalent relationship between industry and fan consumers, as they unfold within my empirical data. As suggested by my previous accounts of the (para-)textual landscape in which the *Transformers* brand exists, professionally produced and fan-made textual elements tend to flow in and out of each other, as a result of incorporation and excorporation processes. Likewise, the relationships between professionals and fans are sometimes characterized by loyalty and understanding, sometimes by hostility and conflict. In the end, accounting for these matters compels us to deal with the delicate yet continuously relevant subject of power. While it is not until the next, final chapter of this thesis that I shall attempt to provide summarized answers to my research questions – which all imply the power aspect – this chapter offers a reading of my object of study as simultaneously a site of fan pleasure and resistance and a of exploitation. By drawing on perspectives developed within both cultural studies and political economy, I hope to increase our understanding of the complexities of our contemporary convergence and consumer culture. As will be argued, what needs to be
emphasized is not the contradicting aspects of Transformers as a site of enjoyment and opposition on the one hand and of exploitation on the other, but rather the ways in which these occurrences are interrelated.

9.1 Transformers as a site of ‘pleasure’

No doubt, Transformers fans enjoy spending time with their object of fandom. My personal meetings with convention attendees not least support this: apart from telling me about the joy they find in, for example, story reading, various types of textual productivity, or in communicating with fellow fans online or offline, the activities going on outside of the interview room provide further insights into the text’s meaningfulness to its fans. Essentially, the convention was an arena for play and community; a space for Transformers-related contests (such as “Transform the fastest”, “Cyber slammers race”, “Guess the music” and “Trivia contest”) and for socialization beyond this, most notably in the form of informal chats among the attendees themselves but also with writer and author Simon Furman. It was also an arena for sharing – of fan-made artifacts (such as “kibashed” figures) as well as of official material (such as “exclusive” video content from Hasbro, posters and sponsored contest prizes). In addition, the delivered convention magazine offers more glimpses into Transformers as a source of pleasure. Apart from the convention schedule, the 40-page long publication included various contents. The first 20 pages consisted of a profile on Furman, a character biography on a particular convention figure, one article on the development of the first Scandinavian Transformers club, and another on various Transformers computer and video games. The remaining 20 pages comprised fan-made creations, such as hand-drawn artwork, computer-drawn artwork, and photocomics. In introducing these creations in the magazine foreword, the authors recommended its readers to “Watch, read and enjoy!”.

While far from all fans attend conventions or spend hours making their own videos, writing their own stories, drawing their own art, inventing their own figures or producing their own blog, all individuals claiming to be Transformers fans would reasonably enjoy the property for one reason or the other. The potential gratification of media consumption in general and fandom in particular have been accentuated in the cultural studies tradition for a long period of time. Especially, reception studies identifying the “active reader” have provided insights into media culture as a site of pleasure (cf. Ang, 1985; Radway, 1987; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; 2002; Fiske 1992; 1994; Fleming, 1996; Baym, 1998). To repeat the arguments from my theoretical framework, the tendency that fans engage in particularly active readings of popular texts – which general-
ly includes the making as well as sharing of meaning – have been read as evidence of fan power. Fiske (1997b), not least, has contributed to this viewpoint by stressing the relationship between pleasure and power. As he has argued: “Pleasure results from the production of meanings of the world and of self to serve the interest of the reader rather than those of the dominant” (1997b, p. 19). Inspired by Hall’s decoding model, he has accentuated the polysemic nature of popular culture texts and found power in readings that are different from those homogenizing and hegemonic which are proposed by the structures of domination. The “cultural dupe”, he argues, does not experience pleasure, but the active reader does. In the view of Fiske then, the popular text is always a “site of struggles for meaning” in which consumer and producer interests tend to clash (1997b, p. 14). As he also concludes, “The basic power of the dominant in capitalism may be economic, but this economic power is both underpinned and exceeded by semiotic power, that is, the power to make meanings” (Fiske, 1997a, p. 10, my emphasis).

Drawing on work developed by Fiske as well as other cultural studies-oriented researchers, such as de Certeau (1984) and Radway (1987), Jenkins developed similar arguments in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans’ Participatory Culture* (1992). Although recognizing that “readers are not always resistant” (1992, p. 34, original emphasis), and that fan and producer meanings may well be compatible, he also acknowledges that “Fans must actively struggle with and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials” (1992, p. 35). In a more recent work, Jenkins has, in a higher degree than in *Textual Poachers*, stressed the limitations to semiotic power (cf. 2006b) and, as also mentioned, both he and Fiske have over the years been rather heavily criticized for their “celebratory” takes on popular culture – not least by scholars demanding a more critical approach to the media industries. In the latter sections of this chapter, I too will problematize the ideas provided by Fiske, Jenkins and others on the notion of semiotic power – especially by accentuating the less “empowering” aspects of fan activity. However, before arriving at this – and in order to provide a more genuine ground for these discussions – I will in this section do a “Fiskean” reading of my data, which includes a presentation of *Transformers* as a site of pleasure. While not claiming to give an all-inclusive account of the possible enjoyments that fans may gain from spending time with their object of fandom, I will here introduce three types of pleasure which are particularly identifiable in my empirical data. These are the pleasures of negotiation, symbolic knowledge, and anticipation. I will then conclude my “Fiskean” reading by presenting *Transformers* also as a site of resistance.
9.1.1 Pleasures of negotiation

Commodities are not just objects of economic exchange; they are goods to think with, goods to speak with (Fiske, 1997a, p. 31). People have a tendency to talk about what they see in the media (Liebes & Katz, 1993; Fiske, 1997a). However, as stressed in this thesis, fans more than any other type of audience have been recognized for being particularly keen on exchanging ideas, opinions or perspectives on their object of fandom amongst themselves; that is, to extend their semiotic productivity into various kinds of enunciative productivity (cf. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006; Bielby & Harrington, 1995; Baym, 2000; Staiger, 2005). Popular culture texts thus form the basis of social interactions within media fandoms, and as this happens, “fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (Jenkins, 1992b, p. 23f). According to Fiske, the pleasures derived from “gossip” (a term that Fiske also uses for fan talk), “are instrumental in constructing social relations and thus our sense of social identity” (1997b, p. 78). Thus, fans have been found to take pleasure not only in “making” meanings, but also in negotiating these meanings within the fandom. Ultimately, this constitutes fandom as an arena for discussions and debates.

But to what extent, then, does the Transformers fandom manifest itself as an interpretive and debating community within my data, and what sort of negotiating took place within the context of the 2007 film marketing campaign? To begin with, the value of belonging to a fandom community was acknowledged by several of my focus group informants. As courageously disclosed by one fan, the discovery of an online Transformers fandom constituted a defining moment in his life; moving him from a state of social isolation to a community made up by “thousands of fans”. For this fan, the Nordic fan community NTFA.com constituted an important space for socializing and communicating with likeminded, as did the NordCon convention arranged by the community. Other fans expressed similar sentiments in the course of my interviews, and, indeed, the activities taking place on various online fan forums give further witness to the pleasures of exchanging ideas and viewpoints. The naturally occurring fan talk analyzed has taken the form of online discussions on an online fan forum, a fan blog and on YouTube. As held by Jenkins, "Online fan communities might well be some of the most fully realized versions of Lévy’s cosmopedia, expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various
artifacts of contemporary popular culture” (2006b, p. 137). While the various strands of enunciative productivity researched here have been triggered by different types of “artifacts” – a trailer video, a viral marketing campaign and two fan-made trailer videos – some topics of discussion tended to reappear. Two such major topics concerned the anticipated Hollywood film’s place within the established Transformers universe and the relationship between fans, producers and the mainstream audience. Maybe needless to point out, these two subjects of debates tended to be interlaced.

Negotiating the film

Again, rather than passively awaiting the arrival of the film, the fans made use of the various official and unofficial paratexts to form images of the film. When this happened, the fan talk did indeed become an arena for the collective negotiation of meaning, yet not necessarily leading to a state of consensus amongst the fans as to whether the film should be seen to cohere or collide with the existing Transformers world. Rather, this particular debate came to disclose some of the “fan-agonism” (Johnson, 2007, p. 287) that the Transformers fandom hosted in the time for the making of the 2007 film. “Co-present meta-texts”, as explained by Johnson, “necessarily exist in opposition” (2007, p. 286) and this circumstance can be taken as a force of much of the enunciative productivity that took place in the context of the 2007 Transformers movie verse. As suggested earlier, a demarcation line can roughly be drawn between fans expressing support of the anticipated changes that the film was expected to bring, and those who tended to voice a more critical attitude towards such changes. The former group of fans usually argued for the need and sometimes even benefits of change, whereas the latter group questioned the producers’ decisions to change certain aspects of the fiction, and expressed their discomfort with unwelcomed changes.

In this debate, a common tendency amongst the discussants was to make remarks clearly intended to start new or boost already ongoing debates. One such provocation was for example delivered by one fan, who posed the burning question: “How far does a change have to stray before it becomes offensive, and completely misses the whole point of the original franchise?”. Another fan was curious about the roots of some of the “hatred” directed against the film and related paratexts and managed to start a rather extensive and heated debate on this topic. Some of the replies triggered by this post were obviously negotiable, posing new questions rather than attempting to provide final answers to the thread-starter’s. Structured on uncertainty markers, such as “maybe” or “could it be”, or formulat-
ed as regular questions, many replies were arguably intended to continue rather than end the discussion. Indeed, the use of these kinds of rhetorical devices to extend the debate was not unique to this debate, but can also be identified in the related debate about relationships.

**Negotiating relationships**

The second major debate then, which largely ran across all the instances of fan talk analyzed, dealt with the relationship between the fans, the producers (individual professionals or companies) and the non-fan audience. As recognized by Jenkins (cf. 1992b; 2006a; 2006b), for instance, the relationship between fans and producers on the one hand, and between fans and the mainstream audience on the other, are anything but easily accounted for. In regards to the former, he stresses: “The relationship between fan and producer […] is not always a happy or comfortable one and is often charged with mutual suspicion, if not open conflict” (1992b, p. 31). Indeed, the contradictory images of fans as both ‘Disturbers’ and ‘Providers’ detected in two of the official paratexts, Michael Bay’s blog and the DVD bonus documentary, clearly underline Jenkins’ argument, as do the fans’ images of the producers as they appear within the fan talk. Moreover, the relationship between fans and non-fans is equally complex, as Jenkins (1992b) also acknowledges. Revealing his own troubles of explaining this relationship, he, on the one hand, stresses that “Fan culture differs in a qualitative way from the cultural experience of media consumption for the bulk of the population” (1992b, p. 286), and on the other, that “There is no sharp division between fans and other readers” (1992b, p. 54). While it lies outside my purpose to investigate the fan/non-fan relationship, it inevitably calls for attention as a side effect of my interest in the relationship between producers and fans, as evidenced below.

As shown in the preceding chapter, especially within the fan talk carried out in relation to the announcement video, it is possible to identify a demarcation line between fans who expressed loyalty to, sympathy with or at least tolerance of the producers’ handling of the film and those who instead voiced anxiety and distrust over the same or who tended to take on a competitive attitude towards the producers. The former group of fans tended to stress the amount of professional efforts which went into the film project; emphasizing, for example, that “a lot of people have been working extremely hard”. Other fans within the same group instead accentuated the quality of the producers’ work, and reminded their readers, for example, that “Hollywood experts” are involved with the project. The latter group of fans, contrariwise, questioned the producers’ capabilities as well.
as ambitions to make a product that would cohere with earlier Transformers narratives. Doubting the producers’ ambitions, several fans predicted that the aim of profit would be a greater incentive than meeting fan requests. These fans seemingly held the conviction that the producers would fail, or deliberately refuse, to “respect” the “basic premises” of the Transformers narrative. Notably, quite many fans tended to interpret their own potential to have an impact on the film production process against the light of what the mainstream audience would want. Some of those who placed little faith in the producers’ competence or wish to meet fan preferences tended to stress that the film was made to please the mainstream audience rather than the fan base.

Like other findings of my analysis, this investigation of the Transformers fandom as a community engaged in negotiating practices indeed points to the relevance of not only fan texts but also of paratexts as triggers of social interaction and debate. Again then, and in line with arguments developed by Gray (2010), from a fan’s points of view, branded promotional material may well constitute more than merely crass commercialism. As suggested here, paratexts, such as trailer videos or immersive marketing campaigns, obviously played a significant role as precisely a source of pleasurable negotiation.

9.1.2 Pleasures of symbolic knowledge

In some notable respects, the fan talk spurred by the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign differed from that triggered by the announcement video as well as the fan-made trailer videos. If the three video paratexts in a particularly high degree managed to evoke ontological discussions concerning the inner values and meanings of the Transformers world, the campaign talk gave witness to the fandom’s readiness to form spaces for “collective intelligence” (Lévy, 1997; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Deuze, 2007). As recognized by Baym (1998), fans find pleasure not only in debating but also in gaining and – no least – sharing knowledge. Having researched the pleasures of fan talk in relation to television soaps, Baym has found that “Deep knowledge allows viewers to build richer interpretations of stories and find the resolutions more rewarding” (1998, p. 116). Indeed, my focus group interview data indicate the value of deep knowledge to individual fans. As voiced by several of my informants, the many layers of story and the rich library of characters within the Transformers lore provided them with a an extensive body of information to “study”, “look into” or “dig into”. As told by one fan, for example, the biographical profiles on the backsides of the toy packaging “were something that kept me hooked” and the fascination they brought compelled him to
learn them “almost by heart”. At the NordCon convention, playful elements such as the “Trivia Contest” aimed at testing the fans’ individual knowledge.

However, as recognized also by Baym, “A large group of fans can do what even the most committed single fan cannot: accumulate, retain, and continually recirculate unprecedented amounts of relevant information” (1998, p. 118). Drawing on his own (Jenkins, 1992b) as well as Baym’s (1998) and Lévy’s (1997) findings, Jenkins similarly acknowledges that “no single fan can know everything” and for this reason a fan community tends to “pool its knowledge” (2006b, p. 139). Within the official film marketing campaign, few elements demanded as much knowledge storage as the ‘Sector Seven’ experience. Unfolding over a range of platforms and containing much detailed information, the campaign encouraged a fan blogger to take on the “task” of collecting and sharing knowledge related to it. Through diffusion of information as well as requests and speculations, the blog and its readers helped make sense of the anything but lucid marketing paratext (Bielby & Harrington, 1995; Staiger, 2005). As suggested earlier, the blog therefore came to function as an arena for collective intelligence, allowing its readers to catch up with potentially missed clues and passwords. Drawing on Lévy (1997), Jenkins comments: “Collective intelligence expands a community’s productive capacity because it frees individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise” (2006b, p. 139). Indeed, supported by the blog, the chances of individual fans keeping up with and enjoying the extensive campaign would have augmented.

As also recognized by both Baym (1998, 2009) and Jenkins (1992b, 2006a, 2006b), the act of sharing knowledge can be pleasurable in itself. In the words of the former, “Fans are motivated by epistemaphilia – not simply a pleasure in knowing but a pleasure in exchanging knowledge” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 139). Certainly, already the fans’ readiness to communicate advice on how to reach or read various contents on SectorSeven.org is evidence of such pleasures. The commentary field on the fan blog was rather saturated with posts guiding the less knowledgeable in the “right” direction. Inevitably, in this exchange of knowledge some fans come across as more well-informed than others – a circumstance that in turn has been taken to be at the roots of much of the hierarchical orders which establish among members of a fandom (Baym, 1998; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006b), and that ultimately can be attributed to the ‘sign-value’ that narratively rich popular culture texts potentially gain in cultures in which knowledge becomes used as a marker of difference and, in the end, status (Baudrillard, 1970/1998). While not fully scrutinized as a consequence of my
research focus, knowledge hierarchies can be detected in my empirical data. For instance, they surface in utterances in which the author “shows off” his or hers own knowledge (Baym, 1998), or conversely, when someone reveals his or hers own lack of knowledge by asking others for help, for example with understanding certain story elements or with character interpretations. The same would occur as individual fans provide the “correct” interpretation of something related to the object of fandom.

To conclude from this then, the Transformers fandom seems to make no exception to previous observations regarding the status of pleasurable knowledge within fandom (cf. Jenkins, 1992; 2006a; 2006b; Baym, 1998). It constitutes hard currency within the fan community, yet at the same time becomes generously shared with less knowledgeable peers, which, in turn, brings further enjoyment. A later section of this chapter gives me cause to return to the value of fan knowledge as I, in describing Transformers as cultural economy, discuss fan knowledge as a form of cultural capital in relation to corporate resources and interests.

9.1.3 Pleasures of anticipation

In this final section on Transformers as a site of pleasure, I want to highlight one particular type of pleasure that comes across particularly powerfully in my empirical data – most notably in the online fan talk – and that to some extent has been accentuated already in the preceding chapters: the pleasures of anticipation. To remind, this type of pleasure has been recognized by Marshall (2002) also, in relation to his account of the “new intertextual commodity”. In order to understand this aspect of fandom pleasure further, some previously presented perspectives on modern consumer culture are helpful. As recognized by Campbell, pleasure is not a property of any object, “but a type of reaction which humans commonly have when encountering a certain stimuli” (2005, p. 61). In an attempt to describe the distinctive nature of the cultural economy (as opposed to the financial economy), Fiske makes a similar acknowledgement: “Its commodities, which we call ‘texts’, are not containers or conveyors of meaning and pleasure, but rather provokers of meaning and pleasure” (Fiske, 1997b, p. 313). However, as Campbell has also pointed out, “whilst one typically needs to make use of objects in order to discover their potential for satisfaction, it is only necessary to employ one’s senses in order to experience pleasure” (2005, p. 61).

What Campbell suggests thus is that dreams alone – “both illusions and delusions” (2005, p. 61) – may offer pleasure. Longing, day-dreaming and “imaginative anticipation” (2005, p. 84) are, as told earlier, said to be key components in
a modern hedonistic consumer culture in which “wanting” has become more crucial than “having”.

So then, how may these insights help us understand the enjoyment of fans’ experience when engaging with their object of fandom? As Campbell observes, advertising in itself constitutes a potential source of pleasure for the modern consumer. The image of a product, he argues, can stimulate enjoyment equal to that possibly created by the product itself. As he also writes: “That the imaginative enjoyment of products and services is a crucial part of contemporary consumerism is revealed by the importance played by representations of products rather than the products themselves” (2005, p. 92, my emphasis). Indeed, the meaningfulness of marketing paratexts has been recognized by fandom researchers also (cf. Gray, 2010). As for example Fiske argues, “Madonna’s posters are as much a part of her meanings and pleasures as her songs and videos” (Fiske, 1997a, p. 5), because “secondary texts” like these can “be read back into the primary text” (1997b, p. 85). Marketing paratexts thus hold a promise of pleasure, and that promise is also, in itself, a potential provoker of pleasure.

Certainly, previously reported fan reactions to various marketing paratexts offered in the context of the 2007 film marketing campaign seem to support such claims. This goes especially for those reactions that came in relation to the so-called announcement video – the first of the official trailer videos made to promote the 2007 film. I have earlier acknowledged that the release of this video was treated by the fans on the TFW2005 forum as an anticipated franchise event (Grainge, 2008, p. 130). Preparatory revelations on director Michael Bay’s blog regarding the time of the official release of video indeed contributed to making it such an event, as did the “leaking” of information about the video’s content prior to the actual release. Before the video was made available, several fans expressed that they “can’t wait” for this to happen. The forum, at this point in time – a year before the film’s actual release – became a ventilator for the fans’ excitement as well as a space in which to collectively anticipate the trailer video through shared speculations and interpretations. When the video was eventually released – a few days earlier than first announced – some fans even expressed disappointment in the fact that the period of anticipation had become shortened. Thus, as suggested earlier too, some of the forum members at least took pleasure in waiting, not only for the actual film release but also for marketing paratexts such as the trailer video to be officially launched. To paraphrase Campbell, the “representation of the product” (2005, p. 92) was seemingly made as meaningful as the product itself. Or, to speak with Gray (2010), the trailer par-
atext was utilized as a frame of interpretation through which the not-yet-seen film became read.

Now, the “real” climax for most fans engaging with the official, or for that matter, the unofficial trailer videos would, of course, have been the film itself. Remarkably, the commentaries offered in relation to at least one of the analyzed fan-made trailer videos revealed the fans’ longing for the film on which the content was built. As with the official announcement video, the viewers of the fan-made version voiced their “enjoyable discomfort” (Campbell, 2005, p. 86) with having to wait for the film. For some, the announcement video constituted an important sign that the film was actually being produced. To other fans, however, the dream that possibly had been nurtured for quite a while turned into a fear once the trailer video had been watched. Campbell acknowledges also that, since “imagined pleasures are added to those already encountered”, “greater desire is experienced for the unknown than the known” (2005, p. 86). Typically then, when finally exposed to the content of the video, quite a few fans disclosed feelings of skepticism and disappointment. Apparently, the unknown – in this case the unseen but nonetheless hyped announcement video – did not meet with these fans’ expectations.

In relation to fandom especially, yet not necessarily only, the form of pleasure discussed here consists in the pleasurable anticipation for something new yet at the same time largely familiar. The awaited commodities and paratexts constitute fresh and previously unseen components to be added to the text with which they are associated, but are still – due to streamability (Murray, 2003; 2005) not least – coherent with the already existent world. In a later section of this chapter, the producers’ efforts to actively promote “the unknown” in order to create word-of-mouth will be considered.

9.2 Transformers as a site of ‘resistance’

So as to complete my “Fiskean” reading, Transformers is here presented as a site of resistance; that is, as a space in which fan power of various kinds can potentially present challenges to the dominant – in this case, the companies behind the Transformers brand. Indeed, a study of power relations would inescapably also be a study of resistance. In my analyzed data, three types of resistance come across as particularly manifest, and these have been labeled: 1) resistance through alternative meaning-making 2) resistance through cultural competence, and 3) resistance through alternative navigation. In the below sections, I first present these forms of fan power (without pointing to their innate limits). I then discuss their
meaning in relation to industry interests and corporate control later in this chapter.

**9.2.1 Resistance through alternative meaning-making**

Enunciative fan productivity channels what Fiske calls *semiotic power* (1997a, p. 10); the power to produce meanings out of the industry raw material that may or may not be in line with those intended by the producers. Using de Certeau’s notion of “poaching”, Jenkins has developed the perspective that views the relationship between readers and writers as an “ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings” (Jenkins, 1992b, p. 24). As mentioned, the fan talk analyzed contains both supportive and critical statements about the producers, their marketing initiatives, or their decisions. If official paratexts such as Michael Bay’s professional blog and the DVD bonus documentary bred ambivalent images of the *Transformers* fans (as both ‘disturbers’ and ‘providers’, not least), the unofficial paratexts created in relation to the 2007 film (most notably the fan talk in relation to the announcement video) bred some ambivalent images of the producers involved with the making of the 2007 film. By talking about the film crew as incompetent, as manipulative or as rivals, the fans produced discourses which ran counter to those of the producers. If Michael Bay through his blog, and other company representatives through the documentary, wanted to pay respect to the fandom – stressing that they “listened” to the fans — interpretations made by some fans instead emphasized the producers’ pursuit of profits. Fans constituting the film as “nothing to do with *Transformers at all*” ultimately dismissed the producers’ self-proclaimed efforts to consider fan wishes and preferences (cf. statements delivered on Michael Bay’s blog and the DVD documentary). Also, by reading one of the official paratexts as “crap”, “boring”, “careless” or otherwise “disappointing”, the fans no doubt created meanings that were far removed from those likely preferred by the marketing professionals, who instead would have wanted any promotional paratext to boost the fans’ enthusiasm for the live action film. As negative judgments were extended to include the film itself, the fan talk as a site for the making of alternative meanings becomes even more obvious; as suggested in the previous chapter, fan talk constitutes a potential source of anti-hype and a promoter of doubt.

By also using the video as a ground for collective negotiation – on the film’s place within the wider *Transformers* universe and on relationships to producers and the mainstream audience – the fans’ semiotic powers are further manifested. As this happened, the video was received not so much as a marketing tool
for a specific media commodity as a, possibly critical, interpretive framework for the fans to utilize as they envisioned and evaluated unseen film (Gray, 2010; see also Liebes & Katz, 1993).

9.2.2 Resistance through cultural competence

The second type of fan power displayed in my data can be understood by help of the notion of “cultural competence” (Brunsdon, 1981; 1986; Bourdieu, 1984; Fiske, 1997b, p. 18). As pointed out in my theoretical framework, according to Fiske, cultural competence, or “popular culture capital” (1997b, p. 18), is an important ingredient when trying to make sense of a popular culture text. In my empirical material, a powerful sort of such cultural competence lies in the fans’ abilities to detect the economic rationale underlying the producers’ various decisions, actions and practices, or what Liebes & Katz refers to as “the business behind the box” (1993, p. 124). Evidence of such distanced, critical reading abilities surfaced in the form of meta-linguistic statements in my interviews with NordCon fans as well as in the analyzed fan talk. As claimed by Liebes and Katz, both this type of reading and the referential form can be imagined to work as a kind of “defense” (1993, p. 128) against the influence of a text.

It has already been shown that fans, when negotiating their opinions about the producers’ handling of the Transformers brand in general and the new film in particular, expressed awareness of their own potential importance or unimportance to Hasbro and the other companies involved. While some fans apparently had faith in the producers’ abilities to meet fan desires, to others it seems to have been obvious that the producers prioritized profits over intertextual allusions, and thereby the mainstream audience over the fan base. In my interviews with NordCon attendees, it was also recognized by some fans that the fan base, apart from constituting a niche market for Hasbro’s products, may equally be, as one informant had it, “a source of information” to the product developers and marketers. The same informant seemed convinced that there were professionals “looking on the forums, checking what we want”, whereas another had noticed how “sometimes they ask what fans think” and that therefore “they’re quite aware of what the fans want”. It was also acknowledged in one of my interview sessions that the fans can potentially contribute to beneficial word-of-mouth by talking positively about new commodities. The possibility that the producers’ might use the fan collective as providers of consumer data and information was also recognized in relation to the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign blogging.

At other instances, the competent fan revealed him or herself as someone clearly conscious about the purposes – or “the manipulative intent” (Liebes &
Katz, 1993, p. 119) – behind different marketing initiatives as well as of the effects that these would try to create in the receiver. In relation to the announcement video discussions, for instance, the main objectives of a teaser trailer were recognized as increased consumer awareness and buzz. Within the same strand of fan talk, fans also predicted the benefits to the producers of keeping certain information from the fans and thereby breed valuable word-of-mouth within the community. In a similar vein, fans discussing the announcement video expressed awareness of the producers’ – in the view of these fans – attempts to “handle” the fandom. As discovered by these fans, the producers involved in the film making occupied themselves with various forms of fan management that would, for instance, keep the fans appeased. Presumably then, as a form of “defense”, the critical ability to detect such fan management techniques, or other marketing strategies, would protect fans from being “manipulated”. When circulated also in the forms of alerts to other fans, the potentials for this cultural competence to work as resistance needs to be recognized too.

### 9.2.3 Resistance through alternative navigation

A third manifestation of fan power in my empirics can be attributed the fans’ abilities to sidestep the producers’ intended and prepared routes to the film. Here, indeed, it is tempting to paraphrase Hall (1973/1980) and to talk about the fans’ powers to negotiate the “preferred navigation” to this commodity as imagined by the marketing planners. Ultimately, the companies’ carefully prearranged campaign, realized through new advertising contents being continuously released like pearls on a necklace, was challenged by the fans’ making of, or search for, alternative pathways to the film. Perhaps most evidently, this power presents itself in textual fan productivity, such as when fans create their own, unofficial content. Fiske (1997b, p. 315), again, sees power in excorporation and play, and thereby views appropriating practices as a potential source of resistance. Jenkins, likewise, recognizes the possibilities for fan-made material, such as videos, to provide more pleasure than professionally produced dittos: “Though made of materials derived from network television, these videos can satisfy fan desires in ways their commercial counterparts all too often fail to do, because they focus on those aspects of the narrative that the community wants to explore” (1992b, p. 249). The fan-made trailer videos analyzed can, as suggested earlier, be read as alternatives to the official paratexts; produced and distributed as they were under different conditions and for different reasons. By editing industry raw-material in new ways – by narrowing certain themes while enforcing others or by appropriating material outside of the official trailer vide-
os – the fan-made versions can be claimed to have provided the viewers with substitute entryways to the movie verse. Parts of the viewer commentary, as shown in the preceding chapter, even recognized the amateur productions as “better” alternatives to the studio version.

In addition to this, the fan-written blog devoting some of its space to the ‘Sector Seven’ experience ultimately allowed its readers to circumvent the producers’ plans. The campaign was, as shown, designed to foster transmedial consumption and extended across a range of online and offline platforms. The hidden passwords, not least, contributed to its transmedial character and would have been intended to make the consumers aware of related commodities and promotional paratexts. However, as a consequence of the blog’s ability to form an arena for collective intelligence, the campaign followers really did not “have to” consume across all of the intended platforms in order to apprehend the contents of the campaign. Rather, with the continuous updates and revelations on the blog and its commentary field, those interested could possibly have made sense of the mystery without reading deep into every textual component pointed at in the campaign. The collective knowledge circulated by the fans might thus have reduced the powers of some of the consumption incentives planted by the campaign organizers. Such a conclusion would indeed be in line with the celebratory accounts of collective intelligence offered by, not least, Jenkins (2006a, 2006b). From a more critical perspective though, it is possible to regard the same collective fan knowledge as a source of potential exploitation. As I now move to accentuate the less flattering aspects of fan activity, this and other problematizing perspectives will be brought into the analysis.

9.3  **Transformers as a site of ‘exploitation’**

When introducing *Transformers* as a site of pleasure, I made references to the 2010 NordCon convention from which I generated my focus group interview data. At this convention, tables and shelves showed fan-made kitbashes but also mass-produced, labeled products still in their logotyped packages. The prize table accommodated numerous items from Hasbro and other sponsors, and on some walls were posters from game publisher Activision, promoting the new *Transformers* game. These products were delivered by the companies involved for free. Products from the sponsors, such as stickers, cards and coupons, were also included in the convention gift bag that was provided to all attendees, as was the Activision poster. Banners with the *Transformers* logotype decorated the convention venue, and one topic on the convention schedule promised a video showing new products from Hasbro. Needless to say, the *Transformers* brand
was also the primary topic of discussion among the attendees. Inescapably then, although existing outside of the corporate sphere, fan conventions of this kind do place corporate brands in the spotlights.

So far, this chapter has acknowledged the *Transformers* world as a site that fans visit for pleasures. Some of the activities undertaken by fans in search for these pleasures can, as has also been suggested, be said to render this world a place of resistance too. Clearly, and as admitted by, for example, Baym (2009) too, there are reasons to celebrate contemporary convergence culture for all that it affords in terms of fan gratifications, fandom visibility, and perhaps also fan influence on industrial texts. However, as stressed in the theoretical parts of this thesis, the same traits of this culture that renders these forms of “empowerment” possible, also open up for potential fan *exploitation*. As pointed out by Baym, fan engagement always comes at a cost, be it in the form of broadband expenditures, website costs, time, or the giving up of other interests or responsibilities. According to Baym, for exploitation to occur, these costs need to be considered higher than the values created through the productive practices performed by the fan, and as she shows in her study of music fandom, fans typically do not experience such a negative relation between economic and cultural values. Similarly, Milner (2009) has showed that fans do not mind being exploited as long as their work contributes to the improvement of their object of fandom. Cultural values in the forms of satisfaction and affect thus tend to outbalance the costs involved in being a fan (indeed, such a relation of values would be a prerequisite for fandoms to exist in the first place). Still, while fans clearly may not necessarily *feel* exploited, we need to problematize matters further by asking two crucial questions: firstly, is it at all possible to measure economic and cultural values against each other?, and secondly, may not exploitation occur *irrespective of* a subject’s mental recognition of the state of affairs? As I will argue in subsequent sections of this chapter, the extent to which fans become potentially exploited needs to be measured not so much in terms of subjective experiences, but more so in relation to whether they, unpaid or poorly paid, take over steps in the commodification process, and most importantly, if they contribute to the surplus value of commodities.

In the following sections then, I radically change my focus by presenting *Transformers* as simultaneously a site of exploitation; that is, as a site in which fans not only create pleasures through excorporating industry material from the immediate, commercial context into the “shadow cultural economy” (Fiske, 1992, p. 37), but where fan productivity of different sorts may also become *incorporated* or otherwise made useful by the same industry for commercial pur-
poses. As Fiske too declares, “There are […] contradictory functions performed by the cultural commodities which on the one hand serve the economic interests of the industry and on the other the cultural interests of the [audience]” (1992, p. 47). Sandvoss, equally, acknowledges that fan productivity always takes place within the capitalist system and therefore might become subject to “exploitive utilization” (2011, p. 61). While Fiske certainly concentrated his analytical efforts on the cultural interests of the audience, others have emphasized the economic aspects to far greater extents. In order to establish this perspective, I make use of the part of my theoretical toolbox that offer critical perspectives on consumer activity (cf. Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2007; Örnebring, 2007; Baym, 2009; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Yang, 2009; Fuchs, 2010; Martens, 2011; Sandvoss, 2011).

Most importantly, I here apply the notion of fan labor to the same empirical data which in previous sections were the objects of a “Fiskean” reading. To frame this account, I draw on my findings from chapter 7, in which Transformers was presented as a business, developed as a transmedial franchise and promoted through immersive marketing campaigns. As disclosed in this chapter, the fans – and the consumers generally – were more or less actively encouraged to become active transmedia consumers and to engage with the brand in more or less “immersive” ways. Without neglecting the no doubt joyful and perhaps even empowering aspects of fandom, I acknowledge here the industry’s efforts to create fandom as well as the potential commercial benefits of having a dedicated fan base for a brand like Transformers. This is chiefly done in accordance with the following three themes, which, as told in my theoretical framework, can be said to summarize the ways in which fans have been recognized to contribute economic value to the industry: 1) fans as content providers, 2) fans as providers of data and information, and 3) fans as brand promoters. However, before considering fan labor in relation to these themes, the fans value as members of a special type of niche market needs to be illuminated.

9.3.1 Fans as niche market

The internal markets created through conglomerate business structures along with the external markets that emerge through licensing agreements with external companies, establish a structure of circulation for branded commodities (Meehan, 2000). As claimed by Meehan (2000), fans are especially willing to attend these markets and to purchase products wearing the brand name of their object of fandom. Fans then, as noted also by, for example, Hills (2002) and Jenkins (2007), have been recognized for constituting a particularly receptive niche
market for new commodities. With Hasbro’s spatial growth and strategic entrance into the media industry (through the establishment of the HUB channel and partnerships with media studios especially), and the increased efforts to grow “core brands” through licensing deals, the company has no doubt managed to create a fruitful environment for their brands, and made possible all kinds of brand extensions in various directions. In short, those passionate about one of the company’s core brands have much to buy into.

Overall, the dense and widespread intertextual matrix created around the 2007 film corresponded to Hasbro’s strategic goals for their portfolio brands, which include the translation of each these brands “into a world of fun and excitement for children and adults globally” (Hasbro Inc., 2007, October 11) and the making of “immersive” brand or entertainment “experiences” (Hasbro Inc., 2007, p. 3; 2008, p. 3; 2009, p. i). It was recognized in my theoretical chapters too that the “unconditional” loyalty characterizing fandom – to which, importantly, some of my informants did not confess at all – has become increasingly acknowledged and appreciated by the industry (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009; Hardy, 2011). Consistent with this, the analyzed annual reports, along with the actual marketing created in supports of the 2007 film, indicate that one of the things that Hasbro and partner companies ultimately aimed for was to “cultivate fan engagement” for the film (Hardy, 2011, p. 13). The ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, not least, demanded and addressed active consumers, preferably willing to become both textually and enunciatively productive. Hence, while the film itself aimed for an audience beyond the most dedicated fan base, many marketing efforts undertaken in relation to it arguably aimed at achieving a “fanatification of audiences” (Nikunen, 2007, p. 11). In the end, the marketing paratexts involved in the 2007 movie verse constructed the Transformers fans, and other potentially engaged consumers, as members of a extraordinary niche market, where as a participant you were expected to become loyal to, not to say immersed in, the brand.

9.3.2 Fans as content providers

Perhaps most clearly, companies’ ambitions to create fandom and to “cultivate fan engagement” are revealed in marketing initiatives encouraging the consumers to become textually productive; that is, to act as content providers (van Dijck, 2009) in one way or the other. As other studies have also shown, audience creativity in general and fan productivity in particular generate contents which may become incorporated by the industry in different ways (cf. Terranova, 2000; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Martens, 2011; Sandvoss, 2011). Although far
from all textual fan productivity undertaken within the context of the 2007 movie verse would have been purposefully exploited by Hasbro, the film companies, or other parties involved, the marketing campaign did contain activities which, to greater or lesser extents, anticipated user-generated contents.

More than in any other place in the researched parts of the film marketing campaign, these types of encouragements were delivered within the various spaces for play created in relation to the 2007 Transformers film. While asking for user-generated content on different levels of complexity, many of the contests, games and gimmicks relied on the consumers’ propensity and willingness to shift from consumer to producer. Among the simpler activities offered in the context of the film marketing campaign were, for example, two of the gimmicks available on the official film website, which encouraged consumers to fabricate their own Transformers portrait or to create a “personal message” from a robot hero and send it to a friend. Other initiatives, such as the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign and the ‘Fanaticon’ contest, asked for higher degrees of consumer productivity. The latter of these two initiatives, as pointed out, demanded particularly high levels of consumer engagement as the contestants were asked to make videos that proved their dedication to the brand. To remind, this contest offered the contestants a chance to meet with parts of the film team provided that they could prove themselves to be “the ultimate Transformers fan”.

Figure 9.1: Free, affective advertising. The winning contributions to the ‘Fanaticon’ contest can be read not only as testimonials of the makers’ passion for the Transformers brand, but also as free, user-generated commercials for the brand in general and the 2007 film in particular. The image shows one of the winners in front of parts of his Transformers collection.
While different in character and style, the three winning videos were united by their exclusive focus on the *Transformers* brand and by their authors’ orally or visually declared praise of the same brand. Also, at least two of the videos ended with anticipating statements made in relation to the imminent film and a mentioning of its date of release. Overall, the contents of these videos make apparent the potential value of getting the most dedicated brand advocates, the fans, involved in the film marketing campaign. Ultimately, what the contest produced was three more, free, paratexts for the fans to explore in anticipation of the 2007 film.

Considering the possibility that fan-made contents, like those produced within the frames of the ‘Fanaticon’ contest, afford companies to cut back on their own, professionally produced and commonly much more expensive, marketing battery, fans’ textual productivity certainly established as a means to lower production costs and thereby also to raise the surplus values of the commodities to which this productivity is connected. As argued by Sandvoss (2011), since fan-made contents created even *without* economic motives or professional ambitions may contribute to commodification processes, the *intents* behind textual productivity cannot work as a meaningful distinction between fan-made and industry generated contents.

### 9.3.3 Fans as providers of data and information

Online textual productivity in particular tends to result not only in user-generated contents, but also in various amounts of meta-data, which *can* be used for commercial purposes and render further commodification possible (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; 2007; 2009; van Dijck, 2009). As noticed earlier, online spaces for play, such as promotional websites, can be regarded as *digital enclosures* within which consumer data, of “actual or speculative economic value”, may be generated through corporate surveillance (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 297). Except for getting free labor to promote a product or a brand, underlying incentives to create different types of media content might also be an urge on the part of the companies to collect demographic or sociographic data. Often, as my own data indicate, the encouragement to become textually productive comes with an encouragement to also provide meta-data such as, for instance, full name, address, telephone number or, at the very least, an email address. In addition, merely by visiting a website or by engaging in an online promotional activity, consumers leave “digital footprints”, which may provide similar information as well as clues about their preferences, behaviors, habits, etc.
The 2007 film marketing campaign gave many opportunities for the companies involved to get information about the consumers. One common strategy was to offer some kind of bonus material in exchange for such information. For instance, on General Motors’ Transformers-themed website, ChevyAutobots.com, the users could access five promotional videos related to the upcoming film only by registering their email addresses on the website. In a similar vein, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign promised more “exclusive” information to those who sent an email to one of the addresses presented on the SectorSeven.org website. Still other incentives for consumers to share their personal data with the companies came in the shape of contests. Having consumers providing their personal data within the context of any of these promotional environments, the companies involved would have established multiple potential points of contact with the consumers. While such contact-spots, from an empowerment perspective, could be regarded as evidence of increased producer-consumer dialogue and hence amplified fan influence, they need also, from a more critical point of view, be understood as enablers of future, target advertising. As mentioned, in the fan talk triggered by the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign such a function was also acknowledged. Through other promotional platforms, such as director Michael Bay’s blog, additional points of contacts were no doubt created. Except for encouraging registration of consumer data in order to be active on the blog forum, the director himself also asked the blog readers for information of a different kind. Whether or not for strategic purposes, Bay occasionally turned to the fans for feedback on accomplishments or for ideas about the contents of the film (see Chapter 8, ‘Living the brand’).

Both as data providers and as a source of information then, the Transformers fans were potentially made valuable to the companies involved. As pointed out by Andrejevic (2007), the insistency by which contemporary corporations seek to monitor consumers and collect personal data renders questions of ownership and control even more pertinent. As he properly observes, such industrial practices raise corporations’ control over consumers rather than liberates these from such control.

9.3.4 Fans as brand promoters

The previous chapter contained a quote from a news post published on Séibertron.com, one of the most popular Transformers communities (see section 8.1.1). The excerpt ended with the following lines, in which the writer thanks Hasbro and the PR firm for sending the community a press kit rich on Transformers-related content:
I can't say thank you enough times to Hunter PR and Hasbro so I'll just do what I do best and that's provide you guys with information about these products and this press kit as well as a bunch of pictures to help all of you get excited about this weekend's release of the movie products.

To an increasing extent – both within academia and, obviously, the industry – fans and other active audiences are becoming recognized also as brand promoters, potentially contributing to the success of a particular brand, product or service through their mere engagement and enthusiasm (Örnebring, 2007; Baym, 2009). Indeed, fans per definition are brand advocates. Without neglecting the fact that, as my own data suggest, fans are not always lyrical for everything about their object of fandom, they do tend to show admiration rather than aversion to it. This dedication shows itself in the rich body of textual fan productivity that can be spotted online as well as offline, but also in the enunciative fan productivity that is perhaps as most visible on online fan forums. Fan talk, as also revealed by my own analyses, can indeed be highly supportive vis-à-vis the object of fandom.

Perhaps most manifestly in my own researched data, the fans' role as promoters is displayed in relation to the release of the first trailer video on the 2007 film. Already in the previous chapter, I constructed the fan talk that was spurred by the video as a vehicle of promotion, recognizing it as an unofficial paratext to the video as such as well as the actual film. It was suggested that, regardless of its character as being either supportive or critical in tone, the forum conversations analyzed can be said to have contributed to hype and rendered the promotional video a franchise event (Grainge, 2008, p. 130), worthy of both analysis and evaluation. The amount of space dedicated to the discussions alone is likely to have raised forum members' and other readers' awareness of the film, and constructed it as an important and possibly even essential element in the Transformers universe, irrespective of its consistency with older narratives. In addition to this, excited and anticipated expressions on the forum can be expected to have worked promotionally in the sense that readers of these commentaries possibly ended up with a more positive image of the promotional video itself as well as the film. It was also suggested in relation to this that, by including links and references not only to the video but also to other textual components comprising the 2007 movie verse, the fan talk's promotional character became expanded. Similar conclusions were also reached in relation to the fan conversations carried out in the context of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign. “Disguised” as an immersive alternate reality game, the campaign worked as a buzz marketing tool in ways previously observed by Örnebring (2007).
As both of these strands of fan talk suggest, even fan-made paratexts created “outside” of a regular commercial environment may take on promotional functions. Indeed, this also qualifies Örnebring’s (2007) argument that fan-made and industrially produced contents may perform similar functions, as well as Théberge’s (2005) observations regarding the value of fan communities as marketing platforms. Of course, a phenomenon such as fan-made trailer videos is particularly interesting to discuss in this context. Additional research should be conducted in order to understand the motivating factors behind this type of fan creativity, which ultimately results in brand environments in which official and unofficial advertisements co-exist and where the borders between the two types sometimes, as my own analyses show, become diffuse (see also Sandvoss, 2011). While various cultural jamming practices have received fairly much academic attention in the last few years, fans’ interests in creating not only alternative stories but also alternative promotional contents have been less explored. What can be concluded from my analyses of two fan-made trailer videos created in the context of the 2007 Transformers film is that they seemed to have spurred similar, hyped reactions as the official dittos, while also encouraging more critical evaluations. In particular, they managed to generate excited and anticipating expressions including phrases such as “can’t wait”.

Hence, while not directly encouraged or requested by the companies, the fan-made videos – as well as the fan talk carried out in relation to the official paratexts – seem to have accommodated a capacity to hype the 2007 Transformers film. The emphasis on the word ‘capacity’ here is intended to stress an important circumstance which deserves consideration, namely that the true effects of what has been identified as “promotion-like” fan productivity on phenomena like brand awareness and hype – or on the actual sales for that matter – remain completely unexplored in this thesis and poorly examined within academia at large. But then, how to even measure a state like hype would occupy the minds of thousands of PR-officers around the world. What I believe that my study has shown is how marketing campaigns readily attempt to create hype, for example by encouraging fans to “spread the word”. Having accentuated the work done by fans as promoters, and other ways in the Transformers franchise manifests itself as a site of exploitation, it is now time to bring together the critical insights offered here with those provoked by earlier presentations of the same brand as a site of pleasure and resistance.
9.4 The *interplay* of pleasure, exploitation and resistance within *Transformers*

Earlier in this thesis, I have indicated my inconvenience with discourses that construct economy and culture as separate spheres. Within such discourses, economic values are commonly placed not alongside but against cultural values and vice versa, as if it were possible to measure these two types of values by the same measures or by the same scale. For example, in a discussion of affective labor in relation to the publishing industry in general and a specific participatory book project in particular, Martens makes the following statement:

> While teens can certainly enjoy participating on corporate-owned websites, teens’ agency is not a consideration here, as the sites are censored and manipulated in order to achieve the best possible marketing and branding. *This raises the question of who is getting more value: teens who are using the sites, or publishers who are getting free consumer research, peer-to-peer marketing, and user-generated content?* (2011, p. 65, my emphasis).

Indeed, while adding to our knowledge about affective labor through her empirically anchored article, Marten falls into the trap of demanding an answer to the unanswerable question of “who is getting more value”. In the below sections I shall, by help of my own findings in relation to previously presented perspectives, argue for the significance of acknowledging the *interplay* between economic and cultural values instead of treating them as if they are created within separate domains. While Fiske acknowledged these connections (cf. 1997b, p. 311), he nevertheless placed his focus on the cultural at the expense of the economical. Ultimately, what is offered here is reasoning concerning the interplay between pleasure, resistance and exploitation within the *Transformers* transmedial worlds of entertainment.

9.4.1 Work as pleasure

As my own data indicate, and as others have also observed, today’s entertainment industries actively seek to establish environments in which consumers can engage in different ways with a brand. Jenkins, for example, acknowledges that nowadays “Room for participation and improvisation are being built into new media franchises” (2006b, p. 145, my emphasis). Likewise, he claims, companies operating within the contemporary entertainment industries seek to “provoke fan interactions” (2006b, p. 145) by consciously producing and designing works that can be expected to attract a solid fan base. Indeed, the spaces for play created within the context of the 2007 movie verse can be read as evidence of such aspirations, as can official forums such as director Michael Bay’s blog. Ultimately, these promotional paratexts were designed to provoke consumer activity.
Similar observations have also been offered by, for example, Comor, who holds that companies existing on increasingly advertising saturated markets have grown gradually fond of presumption as a way “to develop corporate-customer ‘relationships’” (2011, p. 313), and by Sundet and Ytreberg (2009). Drawing on Jenkins, the latter authors have also managed to pinpoint one of the central aspects of affective economies in the following statement:

The emphasis on emotional engagement not only characterizes perceived needs among the audiences; it also does strategic work for the media executives. […] The logic of affective economics encourages media institutions to transform media products into brands, and brands into ‘lovemarks’. The point is to blur the line between media and entertainment content on one side, and brand messages and commercial products on the other side (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009, p. 386).

As the last lines of this quote suggest, in order for people to develop emotional engagement with and loyalty to a brand, the lines between the promotional and the non-promotional needs to be eliminated or at least severely weakened. As I hope to have shown in my presentations of the Transformers intertextual matrix and of specific marketing efforts in particular, such a weakening of borders certainly makes itself strikingly manifest within the researched data. Through recurring textual components, repeated and extended narratives, and immersive spaces for play, the consumers of the 2007 movie verse were to be channeled through a landscape of advertising paratexts and textual commodities which essentially served the same purpose: to entertain the consumers so that they stayed within this brand world for a longer period of time. For this aim, the narratives and characters established with older and newer Transformers texts became vital. As suggested by Hasbro’s annual report as well as by interviewed professionals, the story connected to the Transformers brand is fundamental to the success and popularity of the brand as a whole. Indeed, my interviews with fans as well as my analysis of fan talk confirm this image of the Transformers lore as a key to understanding the pleasurable aspects of this brand world. More than perhaps any other official paratext, the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign took advantage of the fans’ interest in the story and at the same time potentially helped extend it. Within this particular campaign, the border between the promotional and the non-promotional became dissolved to the extent that the marketing became a brand experience (Moor, 2003, p. 416; Lury, 2004). As suggested earlier also, the other ambiguities around which the campaign was built can be claimed to have contributed to the diffuse and at the same time intriguing nature of the campaign.
Signs of the pleasures that fans gain from engaging with their objects of fandom are easily detectible in both enunciative and textual productivity practices. Fans, as argued, take pleasure in communicating with each other. At the same time, though, this pleasure must be recognized as a prerequisite for potential exploitation of them as brand laborers. For example, according to what has been suggested above, the fan-made trailer videos could be regarded both as the result of pleasurable fan productivity – in that they developed out of passion – and as indicators of fan resistance – in that they constituted alternative routes to the film – and as un-paid offerings to the overall film marketing campaign – in that they potentially contributed hype and awareness to the same film. Hence, combined these two readings make visible the linkages between the economic and the cultural. In what follows, I develop my reasoning about the connection between especially pleasure and exploitation within the context of the 2007 Transformers franchise by highlighting the work carried out by fans as they communicated among themselves and anticipated the film commodity.

Working by sharing

Earlier in this chapter, and in the context of my “Fiskean” reading of Transformers, collective intelligence was read as a possible source of resistance in that it allowed fans to circumvent officially sanctioned routes to a marketed commodity. This reading was informed by my own analyses of fan blog posts written in relation to the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign, and the recognition that the blog afforded its readers to enter and participate in the campaign without necessarily following the path laid out by the producers. Yet conversely, in relation to my reading of Transformers as a site of exploitation it was suggested that the same blog carried a promotional function in that it ultimately worked to hype the campaign and as it, precisely because of its collective intelligence modus, facilitated for fans’ to partake in the puzzling marketing initiative. Casting shadows over previous praise of collective intelligence as a site of consumer empowerment or deliberation then (see especially Lévy, 1997; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b), the role played by collective intelligence in relation to corporate brand building needs to be problematized through an emphasis on its potential to also provide the companies with free labor. Knowledge storing and sharing could after all, as my analyses suggest, possibly serve the interest of capital by facilitating participation in marketing campaigns seeking to establish consumer loyalty. While overall stressing the positive aspects of collective intelligence, Jenkins has also raised similar concerns. Writing about fan blogs in relation to the notion of cultural jamming, he makes the following statement: “These bloggers have become
important grassroots intermediaries – facilitators, not jammers, of the signal flow” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 150). Hence, as he also acknowledges, jammers and fans have different motives for their productivity; while jammers typically want to “destroy media power” (2006b, p. 150), fans are more interested in sharing it. In addition to all of this, the promotional work performed in the context of negotiative, and by all means also enjoyed, fan discussions should be acknowledged too. Fan talk, from a business perspective, is buzz after all.

Working by waiting

As shown in my analyses of online fan discussions, the fact that the theatrical debut of the *Transformers* film was months away from taking place when the first efforts in the overall film marketing campaign were rolled out did not prevent them from expressing excitement as well as anticipation. Rather, while awaiting this event, the fans took pleasure in speculations, extra-textual gossip, evaluations and in envisioning the film with the help of the clues delivered via promotional paratexts. In addition to this, fans undertook different types of textual productivity, for example, in making their own trailer videos out of the material released by the studios or in the context of competitions or games. Both the enunciative and the textual productivity with which the fans occupied themselves were no doubt driven by genuine fan passion rather than a sense of duty or for strict commercial purposes. Nonetheless, the waiting period between the launch of the first announcement video and the film – a full year – can also be seen as a period of work. During this time, components were added to the *Transformers* world not only by the industry but by the fans too. The pleasures of anticipation, as also pointed out by Marshall, tend to be expanded through strategies of product promotion which essentially serve to “deepen the investment of the audience in the cultural commodity” (2002, p. 80).

In charge of the period of anticipation, and with the ultimate control over the release of new raw material for the fans to appropriate and discuss, were Hasbro and its partner companies. The analyzed annual reports reveal the scope and levels of strategic planning that go into properties like Hasbro, while the intertextual matrix created around the 2007 film is evident of the sophistication of contemporary film marketing campaigns. Although, in the minds of some, the producers’ decision to reschedule the launch of the first *Transformers* trailer video was due to fan pressure in the form of Internet leaks, it needs to be recognized that, overall, fans lack control when it comes to the release of new raw material to a corporate brand world. The fans are put on hold and can only wait to get a view of the next trailer, the next poster, the next toy-figure, the
next website update, etc., up until the big franchise event: the film. Importantly, this recognition of the producers’ power over the time-factor comes with a previously outspoken understanding of the fans’ powers to exercise influence over this world in other ways, which this chapter has sought to describe.

9.4.2 Fan resistance and its limitations

If the above section had a focus on the relationship between pleasure and exploitation within the promotional environment created around the 2007 film, this section problematizes the producer-fan relationship further by providing additional perspectives on ‘resistance’ on the basis of my empirical data. In my “Fiskean” reading above, it was suggested that at least three instances of consumer resistance can be detected in my case study of *Transformers* as fans produce alternative meanings from the material handled to them, reveal brand- and fan management strategies, and circumvent the official routes to the film. As shown also in an earlier chapter (see Chapter 2, ‘Contextualization and positioning of thesis’), Fiske and his followers have been accused of reading resistance into “everything” (cf. Garnham, 1997; Gitlin, 1997). Admittedly, if we insist that resistance demands a subject who acts intentionally to either promote or hamper change, then the manifestations of fan resistance in my data are reduced. What we find more indicators of, I would suggest, is negotiative practices performed for the sake of pleasure. While fans, for instance, may well perform an act of rebellion by producing their own, alternative trailers, they may do this more out of “pure fun” than with the actual intention of opposing the officially produced dittos. Likewise, by spreading anti-hype through negative forum comments and thereby contradict the official advertising messages, or by sharing unsanctioned promotional material and thereby interfere with the companies’ original marketing plans, the fans can indeed be expected to have upset the marketing apple cart. Yet, the question needs to be asked whether or not these “disturbing” fans are actually engaged in resistive practices?

In my empirical data, there is also evidence that *Transformers* fans are well aware of the industry’s exclusive rights over copyright material. Statements recognizing the company’s powers to call for copyright infringement and undertake actions *vivà-viss* “poaching” fans occur, for instance, in relation to the comments accompanying the fan made trailer videos. This raises another important question in relation to the notion of power/resistance: to what extent does this knowledge, *in itself*, dis-encourage the fans from appropriating intellectual property content?
Considering a ‘Panopticon’ effect

The possibility cannot be ignored that awareness alone, of the fact that Hasbro or the other companies involved may undertake sanctions if they find that fans abuse their property, can be enough to keep people from engaging in adopting activities. Just as the idea of being monitored would have been sufficient to make the prisoners of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon custodial behave appropriately, consumers of media content may arguably place restrictions on themselves if they imagine professionals habitually scanning the fan outlets for instances of inappropriate or even illegal fan creativity. Such a form of power has, as commonly known, been identified by Foucault as one of the most subtle yet nonetheless prevailing means of ‘discipline’ in contemporary society (McHoul & Grace, 1995), and more recently by Andrejevic (2004) as a key feature of the ‘cybernetic’ economy. Following this line of thinking thus, by demanding that fan-made content is removed from YouTube or fan sites companies not only potentially decrease the number of unofficial productions out there, but also possibly prevent other fans from adding unsanctioned content. As noted, for example, one post including images from the announcement video was removed from the TFW2005 forum with the motivation that: “Paramount has already contacted us about the pics and this would get us in even deeper trouble”. While this reminder to fellow fans that the forum is being monitored by the industry would have the effect of discouraging a further sharing of unsanctioned material, we can also take the same statement as an indicator of what Andrejevic (2005) dubs “lateral surveillance”: it is not only that corporations watch fan domains; it is also a matter of peer monitoring by which fans – out of fear of juridical retaliation – watch other fans. On a similar note, by demanding personal data from contest participants or other actives, and thereby reminding people that they are not completely anonymous, companies perform a subtle kind of power that may put a hold on at least some actions of rebellion. These possibilities certainly need to be considered when discussing the power relations between industry and consumers. It should be pointed out, though, that on certain occasions, the “Panopticon effect” seems to have defaulted. For instance, while the forum administrators of TFW2005 evidently made efforts to prevent unsanctioned material from circulating on the board, other fans, as mentioned, adopted a more competitive attitude and, with expressions of triumph, shared copyright content.
Fan appeasement by management

Also in relation to this, it should be pointed out that both fans and professionals undertook actions which can be considered resistive, although the term ‘resistance’ has typically been reserved for the decoder rather than the encoder of media messages (cf. Hall, 1973/1980; Radway, 1987; Fiske, 1989; 1997a); a circumstance which indeed can be justified with consideration to the fact that the decoder is always ‘subordinated’ to the ‘dominant’ encoding industry and therefore is in the greatest need of resistance. Not only within media and cultural studies but also elsewhere, resistance is typically conceived of as something emerging from below. However, such an understanding of the notion should not prevent us from acknowledging the producers’ attempts to “upset the apple cart” of fan productivity – attempts which, if any, would intend to hamper fan activity. For, what else is fan management if not a means for producers to combat unwelcome receptions or actions by the consumers? While some fans included in my data, as mentioned, can be claimed to have acted – intentionally or unintentionally – in opposition to the industry by producing alternative meanings, presenting themselves as competent, critical readers, or circumventing the official routes to the 2007 film or its paratexts, the producers certainly did not passively observe what went on within the fandom. Again, the film studios did make attempts to resist fan exploitation of copyrighted material by asking for links to be removed from the forum. Also, as stressed in relation to my analysis of discourses provided on Michael.Bay.com and the DVD documentary, the producers’ self-proclaimed readiness to “listen to” or “respect” the fans can be read as attempts to resist a critical mass of ‘disturbing’ fans; to appease them by assuring that “everything is going to be just fine, we won’t mess up your Transformers”. Indeed, again, the fans themselves made such readings. Judging from my fan talk analyses, the fans seem to have revealed such discourses as ways to “handle the fandom”. Additionally, discourses presenting the fans’ as trouble-makers, as infringers or copyright violators (images which for instance became detectable on Michael.Bay.com) can be recognized as attempts by the industry to diminish the scope of its own, unique, powers. As acknowledged by Jenkins too: “Public attacks on media fans keep other viewers in line, making it uncomfortable for readers to adapt such ‘inappropriate’ strategies of making sense of popular texts[…]” (1992b, p. 19).

9.5 Transformers as cultural economy

With consideration of the mutual acts of ‘resistive’, or at least negotiative, practices which are made manifest already in my – with respect to the total universe
of professional and consumer productivity out there – limited set of data, the Transformers brand world arguably presents itself as a field of tensions. Inserting the conceptual tool-box provided by Bourdieu at this point of analysis, it becomes possible to initiate a discussion about what resources the industry and the consumers respectively are in control of – and, ultimately, the extent to which Transformers constructs itself as a ‘shadow cultural economy’ in relation to capital.

9.5.1 Fan knowledge and brand narratives: Forms of cultural capital

Needless to point out, Hasbro and its partner companies – including, not least, the world’s largest film studio Paramount – have economic resources that by far would out-compete those possessed by the fans. What the fans are in possession of is instead higher or lower levels of knowledge about their object of fandom. As an earlier section of this chapter summarized, evidence of this knowledge surfaces at numerous instances in my data. It emerges, for example, as the result of fans “studying” character biographies in and as a shared resource within the frames of the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign. In the online fan talk, it is even assumed that, as one fan baldly claims, “90% of the people on this board do know more about the characters than those involved in this production”. While such a statement can neither be falsified or backed up by my own data, and with respect to the circumstance that this resource would be distributed unequally amongst the fans as some are likely to be more knowledgeable than others, it can be argued that knowledge, along with skills, constitutes the fans’ main power asset – a sort of cultural capital that would even have them identified as fans rather than regular consumers and which, through social capital – that is, through fan networking – becomes shared within the fandom.

If fan knowledge and skills can be claimed to constitute cultural capital for the fans, the brand narrative and cultural symbols attached to the Transformers property could, with inspiration from recent re-interpretations of Bourdieu’s conceptual framework, be thought of as Hasbro’s “corporate cultural capital” (Lam, 2010); a form of capital which, as we have seen, emerges from significant economic and strategic investments and, like fan knowledge, becomes shared, albeit in this case within a network licensing partners. One thing that should be emphasized in relation to this is the ways in which the researched marketing efforts in support of the 2007 Transformers film were designed as to either demand or play with fan knowledge. Indeed, my data suggest that fan cultural competence is employed as a significant marketing device, conceivably aimed at generating or maintaining consumer loyalty to the Transformers franchise. The
‘Sector Seven’ experience, not least, was rich in intertextual references to the pre-Hollywood universe. As story fragments become re-told and characters redrawn within this and other marketing efforts arranged within the 2007 movie verse, the value of a solid narrative becomes manifest. The corporate cultural capital then – constituted by the complex Transformers fiction as developed by Hasbro in collaboration with Marvel, Sunbow Productions, the film studios, etc. – comes across as a substantial corporate resource that ultimately serves as a major competitive advantage for Hasbro. Not only does it become a reproductive power that allows ongoing commodification (as it enables more product diversification) as well as spatialization (as the franchise is extended across platforms and possibly also industrial sectors) of the Transformers brand, but it also comes with the potential effect of keeping long-term fans within the franchise.

9.5.2 Affective investments and sunk costs: The price of being disloyal

With complex stories and an impressive library of characters such as those accommodated by the Transformers brand, it would not be possible for people to change the object of fandom without some sense of “capital loss”. For, if we think of Transformers as a specific subfield to the encompassing field of popular culture, with its own more or less unique kind of currency in the form of specialized fandom-knowledge (as to, for example, how characters are interrelated, what media texts are central, the worth of a particular toy-figure on the second hand market, specific jargon, etc.), then entering into another franchise – or, let alone, a completely different subfield – would not be entirely unproblematic. Specialized fandom-knowledge is conceivably losing at least some of its relevance in, for instance, the Star Wars subfield, and most of its relevance in, for example, the subfield of hip hop. A definite move to another fandom would be at the expense of having to “start all over again”; of potentially having to “study” or “read into” a new fictional universe with all its unique traits and components. As Bourdieu has also acknowledged, it is “costly” (1984, p. 86) to be culturally incompetent. If Hasbro and its strategic allies make economic investments to develop ‘worldness’ (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004) around the Transformers property, the fans make what Bourdieu (1984, p. 86), and later Théberge (2005, p. 500) and Moor (2007, p. 133), has referred to as affective investments (also Liebes & Katz write about involvement with a text as “investment”, 1993, p. 100).

Talking about Transformers as cultural economy then, and of fan knowledge as a sort of investment, it would perhaps not be too far from Bourdieu’s original
theory to think of such devaluated fan knowledge as a sort of ‘sunk cost’ – another economic term, used to account for an investment that cannot be recovered. According to sunk cost theory, people are more motivated to continue an endeavor if a significant investment, in time, money or effort, has been made (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). If we accept this reasoning, then, an accumulated amount of cultural capital in the form of fandom knowledge would at the same time be an effect and trigger of brand loyalty – it would demand a rather long-term relationship with a particular brand to grow and it would hamper fluctuating consumer mobility. Against this background too then, the intriguing stories backing up the marketing campaign for the 2007 Transformers film would perform an important function: while possibly scaring off consumers impatient or unwilling enough to “study” the traits of this brand world, the deepened character personas and narrative that were offered by the paratexts accompanying the new franchise film potentially knit other, more investment-willing, fans even tighter to this particular brand world.

9.5.3 No longer a ‘shadow’ cultural economy

My analyses of official and unofficial paratexts produced in relation to the 2007 Transformers film also reveal the extent to which the professionally made universe and the fan-created ditto intersect. The ‘Sector Seven’ experience, for example, – initially produced as a viral marketing campaign – ultimately extended into the fan domain where it, with encouragement from the campaign designers, became constructed as a platform of collective intelligence as well as raw material for textual fan productivity. Likewise, the ‘Fanaticon’ contest resulted in three more user-generated advertisements for the film commodity. These and other accounted for examples of the interconnectedness of the official and the unofficial within the Transformers world imply that Fiske’s image of popular culture in general and of fandom in particular as a kind of ‘shadow’ cultural economy is fragile. While, in one way, Fiske’s metaphor is attractive in that it denotes that fan productivity always, in some sense, occurs after the raw material has been provided, it is less useful if we take it to mean that fan and corporate productivity takes place in separate spheres and against each other (see also Bjurström, 1997). In a culture of ‘prosumption’ – where much consumer creativity seems to be actively encouraged or even demanded by corporations (as to gain a full “brand experience”) – it does admittedly seem increasingly ill-suited to view what Fiske calls “fan cultural capital” as something that is necessarily constructed in opposition to corporate cultural capital. As my own analyses indicate, fans are increasingly drawn into both the commodification and the spatial-
ization of the *Transformers* property as they contribute to the building and promotion of the *Transformers* brand world. As members of a niche market, and as providers of free contents, data, information or promotion, the fans potentially contribute to the transformation of use value into exchange value as well as the extension of the *Transformers* universe to additional, fan-created, venues.

*Capital conversion in relation to fan labor*

These circumstances, in turn, compel us to consider Bourdieu’s notion of *capital conversion* in the light of media convergence and in relation to ‘prosumer’ activity in particular. As noted earlier, Bourdieu nurtures the idea that cultural capital eventually might be converted into economic capital. In recent studies of free-working prosumers, the accuracy of such an idea has been questioned. Steven J. Cole, for instance, opposes the concept of capital conversion in relation to prosumer activity with the motivation that “it is not clear why prosumers would need or want to convert cultural or technological capital into economic capital” (2011, p. 45). Having investigated the field of music recording and found that a majority of amateur musicians are *not* driven by profit motives, he ultimately accepts Toffler’s (1980) argument that “prosumption reconfigure some, but not all, of the dominant relations within the wider social or economic field” (Cole, 2011, p. 45). While it is likely that other interests than economic profit may drive also the majority of fan productivity going on in relation to the *Transformers* brand (for instance, when discussing fan productivity with convention attendees, money as a driver for creating never surfaced), I am less inclined to throw Bourdieu’s notion of capital conversion overboard. The reason for this lies in one of the key claims made in this thesis: that fan productivity, and cultural capital in the form of fan knowledge not least, can be exploited precisely for commercial purposes. Thus, while it may be true that a majority of fans do not convert their cultural capital into profits *for themselves*, there is, as has been suggested, a possibility that fan productivity become translated into economic profit *for companies*. Such a form of capital conversion could arguably be compared to that which takes place when other groups rich in cultural capital, such as reviewers for instance, exercise influence over economic potentials.

Undoubtedly, the industry would arguably not be so interested in creating “immersive brand experiences” in need of engaged, productive audiences if such efforts were not calculated to pay off in terms of increased surplus values. As noted by Dovey and Lister (2009), the economic motives driving convergence culture cannot be ignored. Invitations to consumers to engage and socialize with each other does not, as the authors point out, come “because the ad-
vertising and media industry just want us all to play nicely and have lots of warm friendships” (Dovey & Lister, 2009, p. 141), but rather because the industry wants zones of brand engagement and possibilities to generate consumer meta-data. As Bjurström also reminds us, the possibilities of capital conversion – from cultural to economic – is exactly what “lies at the core of the cultural industry’s interest in popular culture” (1997, p. 476).

What we need to consider in the era of media convergence, and with regard to fan labor especially, is the ways in which not only popular ‘tastes’ and expressions of ‘style’ become incorporated into commercial culture, but also how companies may exploit consumer activity in other ways – and not least in brand building processes. This, in turn, should compel us to understand the notion of incorporation in a wider perspective. As Terranova has pointed out in relation to this subject: “Incorporation is not about capital descending on authentic culture but a more imminent process of channeling collective labor (even as cultural labor) into monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices” (2000, p. 39). Thus, from such a perspective, the popular cultural is not so much a “shadow” to the industry as it is directly rooted in and spurred by capitalism, and fan labor, from the same point of view, takes place within capitalism rather than outside of or in opposition to it.

While acknowledging this should place us in a better position to understand the relationship between cultural capital and commercial potentials in the context of fan culture, this correlation certainly needs further problematization. Admittedly, the relationship needs not be entirely linear, since – as suggested by my data also – fan cultural capital potentially becomes utilized in critical fan practices too. Certainly, from a producer perspective, “too” knowledgeable and skilled fans may contribute to the sense of risk and unpredictability that persistently haunts companies involved with cultural production (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Vogel, 2007). On a related note, the possibility also needs to be considered that “too” much fan cultural capital might place agents in a marginal or contradictory position vis-à-vis mainstream consumers and the commercial development of the brand.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, it is rather remarkable to find how relatively little academic attention this type of potential capital conversion – from fans’ cultural capital to the industry’s economic capital – has been given hereto (most likely a consequence of cultural studies’ and fan studies’ particular focus on use values rather than exchange values). Indeed, a number of critical questions call for further academic attention before we can really assess the conditions for capital conversion in the new convergent media landscape. In
relation to my own study, the most crucial question here would be whether or not fans produce surplus value when they engage in various form of fan productivity. Put differently, to what extent do Transformers fans labor for capital when they produce additional paratexts to the film franchise? In the view of Caraway, who critically discusses accounts of audience labor in general and Smythe’s notion of the audience commodity in particular in relation to the new media environment, surplus value is generated mainly by “the people who toil away in manufacturing, marketing and advertising departments” (2011, p. 701) and not by the audience. But then, if the audience is found to perform the task of manufacturers, marketers and advertisers – in their roles as brand-builders and buzz-generators – would not increased surplus value be the potential outcome of their voluntarily carried out work, given that the commodity in question eventually becomes sold (and its value thus realized)?

Who is creating what type of value — for whom?

As recognized by Humphreys and Grayson (2008) as well as by Comor (2011), when discussing the social consequences of prosumption, the question of “who is creating what type of value — for whom” does become crucial. Humphreys and Grayson, as noted in the theoretical contextualization of the thesis, make a thorough assessment of value-creation in relation to prosumption and develop the argument that “It is only when consumers take over steps that create exchange value” (2008, p. 8), as opposed to use value which is always co-created by consumers, that we can talk about real changes in economic organization and in the producer-consumer relationship. According to the authors, such changes are still rare – even in “the era of prosumption”. When consumers take over steps in the ‘value-chain’ and, for instance, build their own IKEA-furniture then what they create is mainly use value for themselves rather than exchange-value for the furniture company (although, as Humphreys and Grayson also recognize, changed exchange value may be an indirect consequence of reduced production costs). When, on the other hand, consumers create exchange value and thereby contribute to making companies more successful on the market, then we witness “a fundamentally different process” (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008, p. 11) than that described above.

Notably, while fans engaging in various types of promotional activities do create use values for themselves, in the form of pleasure, the activities they take pleasure in are ultimately intended to increase the exchange value of a commodity in the marketplace and, as an effect of this, make the company more successful. Hence, whereas Humphreys and Grayson (2008) draw thick lines be-
tween “production for use” and “production for exchange” when developing their argument, it should be recognized – in line with what has been suggested throughout this chapter – that the two forms of production need not be mutually exclusive. Again, the key trait of affective labor is that it is, simultaneously, both pleasurable and exploitable. Indeed, when explaining that “Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (Terranova 2000, p. 37), Terranova essentially summarizes the type of capital conversion that we deal with here. As strongly argued by Marx, companies exploit labor by denying them the full rights to the surplus value that they produce. In the case of fan labor, the laborer typically gets “paid in fun” (Wessels 2011, p. 80), or, as in some situations, in contest prizes which, not uncommonly, are promotional in themselves.38 As also acknowledged by Humphreys and Grayson, the question of how (or if) the surplus value of co-produced commodities should be distributed to participating consumers still awaits its answer.

To Comor, as to Humphreys and Grayson ultimately, strong evidence exist that prosumption “tends to entrench status quo relations and structures” (2011, p. 37) rather than, as argued by some (cf. Tapscott & Williams 2006; Deuze 2007; Bruns 2008), challenge existing power hierarchies. For if the driver or result of prosumer labor is increased profits, he argues, then the established producer-consumer relations will prevail. Discussing the “hegemonic implications of prosumption”, Comor concludes that what prosumption empowers is both “powerful vested interests and commodity-focused individuals” (2011, p. 321). If we accept Comor’s arguments, the issue of social change versus social reproduction no doubt becomes determinative in this assessment of power-relations in relation to the Transformers brand world. For this reason, the next and final section of this chapter shall continue this discussion on capital conversion with respect to its conceivable social effects.

9.5.4 Change and reproduction within the cultural economy of Transformers

Certainly, the notion of reproduction has significance to my object of study in more than one sense. As shown, it lies at the core of the commodification process in which the Transformers brand is caught up – as the brand becomes rein-

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38 To provide an example of this: a press kit similar to or identical with the one sent to fan community Seibertron.com prior to the movie premiere was made the prize of a contest called ‘Transformer’s Press Kit Contest’. The contest was announced on Michael Bay’s blog on March 8, 2007, and required the participants to 1) name their favorite Transformers character and 2) motivate this choice.
vented over and over again – and it takes place every time a fan appropriates any content related to the franchise. Beyond this, the notion of reproduction – and its antonym, change – becomes essential when discussing the social consequences of capital conversion. The idea that cultural capital becomes converted into economic capital lies at the core of Bourdieu’s explanation of how social structures become reproduced in social space. The insight that symbolic and economic forms of capital are interconnected, led him to conclude that profound changes in social structures are unlikely to occur. Rather, he found, the already wealthy (in money, knowledge, social relations, etc.) are likely to keep their power positions in the field in question.

Nonetheless though, every field is an arena of battle, and within the area of cultural production established producers struggle with “newcomers” for positions (Bourdieu, 1993b; 1996; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). As in social space in general, revolutions are deemed unlikely to occur within cultural production since, as Bourdieu argues, structures restrict individual freedom. Writing about “the space of possibles”, he promotes the idea that within this field, there are things that can and cannot be said or done (at least on some level, this idea can be related to the previously described ‘Panopticon-effect’). In this view, it would indeed be tempting to regard Hasbro and its partner companies as the established producers of Transformers and the appropriating fans as the “newcomers” to this field of production. At the same time though, it needs to be acknowledged that a loyal fan base would always, and from the beginning, be counted on as future consumers of any entertainment franchise. In addition to this, the fans, and the imagined fans-to-be, are “newcomers” who are also partly invited to co-produce. They are frequently asked to step into the brand-building process and ultimately act as (co-)producers. The legitimate question to pose here then, is what implications this condition might have on the producer-consumer relationship, and to what extent it actually alters the fundaments of capitalism in the sense that some prosumption analysts have suggested.

In order to assess the effects of what can be claimed to be “semi-sanctioned” prosumption in relation to contemporary entertainment on the prevailing economic structure, it is, for starters, essential that we do not confuse mode of production with relations of production. For, given what has been suggested above about cultural capital potentially converting into corporate fiscal wealth, what seems to be changing in our contemporary convergence culture is the latter rather than the former. As long as fan productivity – how ever rebellious or voluntary – is rooted in and feeds back into the industry, it arguably underpins a capitalist mode of production rather than challenges it. Importantly too, at the same time
as fans and other active consumers do seem to become all the more significant as a productive force that operates not only “in the shadows of” but also largely on the direct or indirect encouragement of the professionals, distinctions between all groups of agents are still visible in my researched material. Again, the unequal economic and legal conditions can be claimed to be at the roots of such distinctions. Hasbro ultimately holds the exclusive rights to the Transformers property and the company is, as stressed earlier, in charge of both the spatial expansion and the durability of the franchise. When fans are found to circulate copyrighted images and the film studios require this to be removed from forums, this form of institutionalized power is perhaps as most evident. As recognized also by Ross, contemporary convergence culture is ultimately a site in which “users have unlimited access but no rights over their content” (2009, p. 137).

Then, when fans express worries that what they themselves or other fans do may get unpleasant consequences, a more disciplining form of power (the ‘Panopticon effect’) surfaces. Following Foucault, such a form of power is largely produced through discourse (McHoul & Grace, 1995). Indeed, distinctions between producers and fans of Transformers are both created through and reflected in language. In my data, producers obviously adopt an ambivalent attitude towards the fans as they communicate with them as simultaneously ‘disturbers’, ‘providers’ and ‘professionals’. While discourses constructing the fans as helpers and even experts, at least rhetorically and partially, would break down the walls between company employees and fans, discourses creating the same group of consumers as geeks, infringers or even maniacs would arguably reinforce already existing distinctions between the two groups of agents. Similarly, on the consumers’ side, fan talk depicting the professionals as profit-hungry and disrespectful would have the same effects. While many forum members did make use of more neutral labels such as “the professionals”, “the production team” or “the filmmakers” when speaking about the people involved with the film, others chose to employ more evaluating dittos, such as for example “big shot” or “numbnuts”. Discursive phrasing like these inevitably set the tone for much of the forum conversations, and the previously exemplified competitive discourse certainly added to the construction of remoteness in the fan-producer relationship.

In addition, fans also build walls between themselves as a collective and the mainstream consumers, for example by stressing their superior knowledge of Transformers or their loyalty over time. However, as my analyses of actual marketing texts suggest, the campaign producers seem to have made no significant
distinctions between the most dedicated fan base and the average film consumer. Rather, the participatory character of many of the spaces for play and paratexts included in this campaign predicted that all intended audiences would have an interest in extending the film experience across promotional websites holding various gimmicks or games, contests, virtual worlds, transmedial narratives, and so forth. In relation to the discussion on reproduction versus change in prosumer culture, this circumstance may have important consequences. Can it be, for instance, as Andrejevic (2009) has argued: that the more we are expected to become active – to follow the next link, to download the latest application, or to upload or own contents – the less probable it is that any real social change will occur? This matter certainly needs to be explored further in additional studies. Yet, questions concerning the implications of media activity have been the subject of theoretical discussions for a long time. Perhaps, in times when companies do their best to turn us all into devoted brand advocates, inhibiting encompassing “brandoms” (Guschwan, 2012), Baudrillard’s arguments from the pre-Web 2.0 era will gain new relevance. As he has provocatively argued, resistance is only really possible if we refuse to participate; if we make an active withdrawal from brand worlds.

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This chapter has added additional layers of theory onto the empirical findings presented in chapter seven and eight. It has, by assessing the issue of power in relation to my object of study and with the support of my preceding results chapters, provided the necessary foundation for my final conclusions.
10 Conclusions and ways ahead

In this final chapter of the thesis, I provide the summarized and conclusive answers to my research questions. The chapter ends with suggestions as to how future research may help us understand aspects of my findings as well as potentially enrich a continued debate about the state of our contemporary convergence culture.

10.1 World-building and promotion in the era of media convergence

My first research question addressed the problem of how producers and consumers, in collaboration and in conflict, contribute to the textual building and promotion of the Transformers brand, and the 2007 movie verse in particular. Leading me up to this and related questions was a growing curiosity about the implications of media convergence on the producer-consumer relationship, and on the resulting brand worlds. Ultimately, worlds of transmedial entertainment are the result of joint efforts by companies and consumers. It is true that brands *per se*, as recognized for example by Arvidsson (2005, 2006), demand input from both producers and consumers to be made meaningful. They are invented in company board rooms, supported by marketing practices, and sold in stores, but gain meaning only when consumed. By mapping the official intertextual matrix that was created around the 2007 Transformers film, along with some of its extensions into the unofficial domains of this movie verse, I believe that my study has pointed at some of the ways in which brand worlds can become co-produced by professionals and amateurs. Theoretically, the notion of *paratext* – as introduced by Genette (1997) and later developed by Gray (2010) – has been found especially rewarding when accounting for the textual contributions that companies and consumers respectively add to transmedial worlds of entertainment. As made manifest through my analyses of actual paratexts, and as articulated in the preceding chapter, it seems increasingly legitimate to describe the official and the unofficial textual worlds as largely intersecting rather than existing in parallel or in constant opposition to each other. In this first main section of the chapter, I emphasize central findings which essentially derive from my first research question.

10.1.1 Levels of media convergence

My multi-method approach to my object of study has afforded me to investigate the building and promotion of the Transformers brand world at more than one level. Importantly, when bringing all pieces of data together, we can begin
to see how different levels of media convergence may be interrelated within the frames of transmedial entertainment properties. In my data, three such levels stand out as particularly central to these brand worlds. On the organizational level, we can see how Hasbro and its partner companies – through processes of commodification and spatialization (Mosco, 1996) – establish the multi-platform infrastructure upon which the Transformers brand is built, and through which the property is constructed as a commercial intertext (Meehan, 1991). Thus, at the foundations of this brand world is industrial convergence, realized through joint ventures and strategic alliances (Arsenault & Castells, 2008) between Hasbro and its partner companies, including major media conglomerates, such as Viacom as well as non-media actors like General Motors. This industrial convergence, in turn, creates textual convergence ad absurdum: the industrial infrastructure at Hasbro’s disposal becomes the home of a mish-mash of media narratives, artifacts and advertising, in which the borders between the promotional and the non-promotional are deeply blurred. By means of, most notably, recurring textual elements, repeated and extended narratives, and spaces for play, advertising is translated into entertainment, and commodities come to perform promotional functions. When engaging with the brand as a transmedial experience (cf. Klastrup & Tosca, 2004; Jenkins, 2006a; Littau, 2011), consumers become not only semiotically productive but potentially also enunciatively and textually (Fiske, 1992; Sandvoss, 2011), which in turn causes at least a superficial identity convergence through which producer and consumer roles overlap. As members of a particularly receptive niche market, and as providers of contents, data, information and promotion, consumers and fans especially perform affective labor (Hardt & Negri, 2000) to the benefit of the brand and thereby also the companies behind it.

10.1.2 Brand growth and sustainability

If levels of media convergence is one way to describe how transmedial worlds of entertainment may be constructed and promoted by producers and consumers respectively, accounts of the spatial growth of these worlds add further to our understanding of these phenomena. Is has been shown that the Transformers brand is underpinned by a cross-industrial infrastructure, created through processes of spatialization (Mosco, 1996) and nurtured by the inherent streamability (Murray, 2003; 2005) of the brand especially. Parallel to the expansion of its core brands into cross-platform experiences, Hasbro has extended its business interests into domains previously remote to companies operating within the toy sector. Presumably, a brand world such as Transformers grows spatially with eve-
ry new brand extension, be it in the form of new texts or paratexts added to it. Chiefly, the world can be said to grow in two respects. Firstly, its scope distends as the brand develops into new markets as well as commodity platforms. Secondly, and simultaneously, the density of the promotional web resulting from the first type of expansion increases. Yet, as stressed, the spatial growth of a transmedial brand world is not only the concern of companies, but should also be considered an effect of fan productivity. Ultimately, unofficial fan-made paratexts contribute to the expansion of boundaries of these worlds and thereby also to their increasingly voluminous and dense body. This makes for mobility and allows consumers to move, more or less seamlessly, in and out of the official and the unofficial domains that together constitute transmedial worlds of entertainment.

If the spatial, transmedial, dimension of brand worlds has gained increased recognition over the years (cf. Meehan, 1991; Jenkins, 2006a; Lash & Lury, 2008), aspects related to time have arguably attracted less scholarly interest (exceptions to this include, for example, Hills, 2002; Gray, 2010). However, I shall here emphasize three ways in which the temporal dimension gains significance in relation to my object of study, and through which brands such as Transformers achieve what, using an umbrella term, might be referred to as sustainability. Firstly, transmedial worlds of entertainment are made to have enduring design. The marketing surrounding the 2007 Transformers film discloses ambitions both to keep long-term fans continually interested (primarily by help of intertextual allusions, such as the yellow Volkswagen Bumblebee, recognizable actors’ voices, early taglines, etc.), and to help new audiences on board (through pre-stories to the film and introduction of central narrative elements, such as key characters or basic plot). Secondly, and ultimately a consequence of spatialization and of content streaming especially, transmedial worlds of entertainment are constructed to have constant presence. The encompassing film marketing campaign and the general expansion of the Transformers brand itself both signify the producers’ outspoken interest to leverage their brands “anytime or anywhere” (Hasbro Inc., 2009, p. i). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in relation to the focus of this thesis, transmedial worlds of entertainment develop through a strategic timing of events, which potentially cultivates consumer interest and, in turn, fuels fan-driven brand expansion. That timing is essential when it comes to the planning and realization of film marketing campaigns is hardly surprising, yet what should be made subject to further scrutiny is how fans and other active consumers actively work to fill in emergent “gaps” – and not only those semiotic gaps which, as claimed by Fiske (1997b), constitute any “producerly”
text, but also the temporal gaps that inevitably occur between the textual components of such texts. Seemingly, all three components of sustainability would be crucial for the commercial success of an entertainment franchise.

10.1.3 Industry and fan re-use

An explicit Hasbro strategy has been to grow its core brands through re-use of already existent contents. Properly speaking, when commodifying its brands the company tends to behave much in the same way as fans are known to do: they appropriate already existent content and make something partly new out of it. Thus, although companies operating within the sphere of entertainment do have the resources to develop entirely new products and brands – which they of course also sometimes – they obviously continue to strive for reproduction of what has already been produced. As pointed out by Hesmondhalgh, cultural production always takes place at the intersection between the already proven, the standardized, and the predictable on the one hand, and the innovative, the surprising, and the novel on the other (2007, p. 98). Speaking with Deuze (2007), who in turn borrowed from Peterson (1976), in the case of Transformers, the market logic seems to dominate the editorial logic – at least at the inter-textual level. While in the view of some fans the 2007 film did not respect the “basic premises” of the Transformers text enough, its overall content was nonetheless rooted in a branded narrative introduced almost 30 years ago.

Having textual components and narratives derived from the film re-used in related commodities and marketing paratexts, Hasbro and its partners can be said to have taken the principle of reproduction one step further. The film’s contents became liquefied and ultimately streamed into the promotional. Processes of mediatization were, as interviewed professionals also confirm, crucial, and rendered a world rich in storylines and characters for the consumers to explore and for the company to continuously exploit. Provided with new imagery and narrative ingredients from the film-supporting commodities and paratexts, the fans contributed their own appropriated contents to the Transformers brand world in general and the film franchise in particular. Ultimately, their joint productivity paved the way for an unofficial Transformers world which partly – and in some cases heavily (cf. the ‘Sector Seven’ campaign and the fan-made trailer videos) – overlapped with the official brand world.

10.1.4 Brand worlds as sites of collaboration and conflict

Although no one can deny a brand owner the authorized rights over a franchise, as secured by copyright and intellectual property laws, fans still tend to develop a sense of ownership of their objects of fandom as these are excorpo-
rated from commercial culture into fan culture (cf. Jenkins, 1992b; Harris, 1998; Shefrin, 2004; Gray, 2010). Given this, it is not hard to see why fans may want to take chances to collaborate with professionals in the making of “their” favorite brands, once such chances are given. As shown, in the context of the new Transformers film many opportunities for consumers to go creative on the brand – and to even provide ideas during the filmmaking process – were rolled out along with the progressing film marketing campaign. Consumers were invited to produce their own branded content, and to share this with fellow consumers. As also shown, there is evidence in my material of sympathetic relations between producers and consumers. There are instances of agreement between the two groups of agents – expressed mainly through fan statements signifying loyalty, sympathy and tolerance with company decisions, but also through industry discourse constructing the fans as providers or even professionals.

While, as proposed, detected fan management tactics were aimed at nurturing a non-conflictual relationship with the consumers, my study nonetheless suggests that transmedial worlds of entertainment are containers of both collaboration and conflict. Consumer and fan interests may, as my data indicate, occasionally clash with company decisions, and consumers and producers do not always share an understanding of what is best for the brand (cf. Jenkins, 1992b; Hills, 2002). For example, where some fans evidently request more of a narrative continuity in the Transformers fictional universe, Hasbro and its partners are inclined to attempt “new beginnings” so as to satisfy also the mainstream consumers. Likewise, where some fans demand more impact on the brand-building process, professionals involved also request freedom from such demands as they want to “do their thing” with the brand in question. Most notably, fan expressions of anxiety, competition or distrust, along with industry rhetoric portraying the fans as ‘disturbers’, indicate a strained relation between fans and industry. In addition, there is evidence in my data of conflicts emerging within the Transformers fandom. Instances of such “fan-agonism” (Johnson, 2007, p. 287) become particularly manifest as forum discussants negotiate the place of the film within the wider Transformers universe and the fans’ relationship to the industry.

10.2 Conditions for consumer participation in relation to world-building and promotion

It has been suggested above, as well as in other parts of this thesis, that worlds of transmedial entertainment ultimately are created through consumer participation, on both a signifying and textual level. This section deals with findings that relate to my second research question, which essentially concerns the conditions for such consumer participation in relation to brand worlds like Transformers. My
study indicates that brand owner Hasbro ultimately targets consumers who are willing to explore the company’s branded environments by moving between product categories and media platforms. This leads me to conclude that Hasbro ultimately seeks for active transmedia consumers (Scolari, 2009) with “fan-like” manners. The consumers of the film marketing campaign were especially encouraged to become involved with the brand for a longer or shorter period of time, and to thereby have their brand experience extended beyond the toys or the film. Various gimmicks, games and contests provided the most obvious spaces for consumer play. However, outside of these consumer “playgrounds” (Gray, 2010, p. 165) – and even within them – restrictions to such consumer participation are noticeable. Ultimately, when consumers were found to be “too” participatory – when they demanded “too” much say in the brand-building process – they were occasionally also discouraged to be productive.

10.2.1 ‘Endorsed’ forms of consumer participation

The 2007 Transformers movie verse was rich in platforms that invited various types of consumer participation. Spaces for play – such as the ‘Sector Seven’ experience, the gimmicks on the official film website, or the ‘Fanaticon’ contest – basically asked the consumers to become productive so as to gain a full brand experience while waiting for the film to open at theatres. Speaking with Hardy, the producers obviously wanted to “cultivate fan engagement” (2011, p. 13) for the brand by initiating what must ultimately be understood as endorsed forms of consumer participation. Conceivably, such forms of consumer participation allow consumers to play with the brand, or content connected to it, without running the risk of meeting accusations of intellectual property violation. They are potential sources of fan pleasure, as they may both build excitement for an upcoming major franchise event and provide meaningful occupation during periods of anticipation. However, as my own study suggests, these forms of consumer participation are chiefly also activities that take place within a particular “pre-structured” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 247) promotional context with spatial and temporal boundaries, and work under certain premises. Most notable, they are initiated by companies and framed by a set of explicit rules and/or technological affordances. To the extent that these forms of consumer participation trigger any kind of textual productivity, the result would be, drawing on Genette (1997) and Gray (2010), official or at least “semi-official” paratexts, which mainly, yet not necessarily always, are supportive in character. By all means, the various spaces for play arranged within the context of the developing movie verse allowed for, or encouraged, some rather different forms of consumer in-
put. Broadly speaking, an initial distinction can be made between efforts which expected textual respectively enunciative consumer participation. However, it needs to be recognized that many of the arranged activities encouraged both types of productivity, simultaneously. Likewise, it should be noted that especially the former type of participation took different forms of expression.

In terms of endorsed forms of textual consumer participation, a theoretical separation can be made between activities which required consumer input in the shape of content and those which required data and information (again, many of the activities made both kinds of requests at once). As the observant reader will notice, these two sub-categories to textual participation resonate with my previously presented, theoretically and empirically underpinned, typology of fan labor, in which the value of fans as, among other things, ‘content providers’ and ‘data and information providers’ were stressed. Among the activities encouraging content creation, there are significant differences in terms of expected consumer engagement. Encouragement to participate by offering some kind of personal data (for example an email address) or information (such as ideas or feedback on producers’ decisions) were also, as shown, contained in many of the promotional activities framed by the overall film marketing machinery. Through invitations to enunciative consumer participation, the consumers were ultimately intended to contribute to the hype of and buzz around the 2007 Transformers film or related commodities. Returning to my typology of fan labor, there is evidence in my data that the consumers’ value as ‘brand promoters’ was not overlooked by the companies. During the overall film marketing campaign, the consumers were relied on to share contents – their own or official – with other consumers.

10.2.2 ‘Unendorsed’ forms of consumer participation

All in all then, transmedial worlds of entertainment typically offer a lot of room for consumers to enjoy themselves with the brand they care for. However, inside as well as outside of the immediate (however porous!) boundaries of the Transformers film marketing campaign, consumers participated in the brand-building process in ways which were obviously not embraced by the companies or individual professionals working for these. As my data signal, even within a brand environment crowded with official textual components, and with lots of windows to consumer surveillance, there is room for uncontrolled and possibly unendorsed forms of fan participation too. Contrary to endorsed participation, these forms would not be initiated by the companies involved; more likely, as my study implies, they would be worked against by copyright protectors, or
possibly prevented by help of fan management tactics. They would, as suggested below, occur in contexts which may or may not be directly promotional, and in which spatial and temporal boundaries are more fluid. While not restricted by the same premises as endorsed forms of participation, the unendorsed dittos still suffer from significant limitations in terms of what can and cannot be done. Most notably, unendorsed forms of consumer participation would be framed by juridical constraints which in turn are determined by ownership structures. To the extent that such participation should result in textual productivity, it would generate ‘unofficial’ and potentially, yet by no means necessarily, ‘critical’ paratexts (Genette, 1997; Gray, 2010).

As my research focus has been on the officially launched film marketing campaign preceding the 2007 Transformers film, and on consumer-generated paratexts created in relation to this, my empirical data is admittedly biased towards endorsed forms of consumer participation. One of my central ambitions has after all been to investigate what consumer participation the campaign per se invited. Nonetheless, as a result of the perceptively diffuse borders between official and unofficial domains within transmedial worlds of entertainment, my data do contain paratexts, and parts of paratexts, which essentially would have to be regarded as unendorsed by nature. The fan-made promotional videos, for example, could readily be claimed to result from a form of unendorsed textual participation in the brand in question. These videos were crafted from copyrighted material and distributed outside of the involved companies’ own channels. While the videos’ continuous lives on YouTube imply that Hasbro, and the film companies in particular, have developed a rather tolerant attitude towards fan appropriations like these, my data also suggest that such tolerance was not always expressed within the context of the new film. Especially in relation to unendorsed enunciative participation, companies’ frustration with “too” engaged consumers become manifest. When members of the TFW2005 forum began circulating unsanctioned copyrighted material, Paramount Pictures allegedly interfered. Likewise, discontent with fans demanding “too” much participation was expressed on director Michael Bay’s blog; when spoken about, and addressed, as ‘disturbers’, the fans were perceptively discouraged to participate in the brand-building process in general and the filmmaking process in particular. As I now move on to conclusions related to my third and final research question, the implications of what has been suggested in this and the previous sections of this chapter on the distribution of power within transmedial worlds of entertainment are assessed.
10.3 Manifestations of power within transmedial worlds of entertainment

I want this film to be awesome, to do justice to the franchise that I love, and get non-fans pumped about something that I already know is cool. Taglines recycled from the last 50 sci-fi movies and trailers released in a quality that could be trumped by an online fan with a nice computer is not going to cut it. I want to see a professional quality, well-written, blockbuster style film that people would want to see even if they had never heard a thing about Transformers. This trailer looks like a B-movie effort designed to capitalize on a known franchise in order to make money. […] (P36.6, 2006, June 29).

The above quote, from one of the analyzed fan forum threads, works as an apt illustration of the underlying tension that any branded world of entertainment would contain, existing as they do in the intersection between economic and signifying practices; between the material and the symbolic. Having seen the first trailer video, the post author is concerned that his/her expectations on the new film will be frustrated by the producers’ eagerness to “capitalize” on a beloved object of fandom. The fan wants a “well-written”, “quality” product, not an average “B-movie effort” just intended to “make money”. The choice of words certainly points to the long recognized dilemma of all cultural commodities: how to be original, a piece of art even, and at the same time compatible with capitalist interests (Garnham, 1979; Ryan, 1992). Most notably, the fan in question wants the film to “do justice to the franchise that I love” – a wish that is repeated by fans at different moments and in diverse contexts in my data. While many fans obviously welcome change and novelty in relation to their object of fandom, it has been striking to find how the first official paratexts released in connection with the film caused not only anticipation and excitement within the fan base, but also some considerable degrees of concern, mainly stemming from worries that the franchise was now being driven down a new and not necessarily progressive path, or as voiced by one fan, in “the wrong direction”.

Arguably, in a genuinely ‘participatory culture’, the risk that an object of fandom should be taken in “the wrong direction” would be significantly reduced or even eliminated, as there would only be the direction worked out by industry and fans in collaboration. Without doubt, modern media technology and contemporary Internet have rendered consumer productivity a lot more visible and loud in an everyday context (cf. Tushnet, 2007; Gray, 2010; Sandvoss, 2011). And, as shown through mine as well as previous research, consumers participate in brand-building processes in both endorsed and unendorsed ways. Seemingly then, today’s brand worlds are indeed participatory in many respects. They obviously strive for active, engaged, and even textually and enunciatively productive consumers.
Yet, while we could end the discussion with such an appealing conclusion (that basically seems to validate previously announced claims about increased consumer power in the era of media convergence), the fan quote above, as well as other parts of my data, compel us to look beneath the surface of the apparently participatory culture that brands like *Transformers* seems to breed. What promises does such a culture actually hold out to consumers – or to the companies involved? With what authority may consumers actually partake in the building of these brand worlds? As suggested by this study, claims about consumer agency need to be critically evaluated in relation to corporate interests, which potentially profit from various forms of consumer participation. It is the purpose of this section to provide suggestions as to how my final and crucial research question may be answered – the central question that the overall aim of this thesis boils down to. To remind, this question aims to critically assess the producer-consumer relationship by asking what forms of power this may contain, and how these forms are being distributed between the two groups of agents respectively.

In the introduction to this thesis, the notion of ‘power’ – in relation to my specific object of study – was described as “the ability to influence or exercise control over a brand world”. Then, as my theoretical framework unfolded, cultural studies-based and political economic-inspired perspectives were offered that added nuances and richness to this initial definition. Most importantly, the kind of power that inescapably come with corporate ownership and control over means of production (cf. Garnham, 1979; Meehan, 1991; Ryan, 1992; Wasko, 1994; Mosco, 1996) was contrasted and set in relation to the kind of power that stems from consumers’ abilities to rework industry raw material in different ways (cf. Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1987; 1992; 1997a; Jenkins, 1992b; 2006a; Liebes & Katz, 1993; Gray, 2010; Sandvoss, 2011). As these collated perspectives suggest, and as illustrated by the colorful quote above, the struggle for influence or control over contemporary entertainment worlds is fought on different levels and by means of some rather different forms of power. Earlier in this thesis, I attempted to prove the meaninglessness of endeavors aimed at measuring separate forms of value involved in cultural production/consumption against each other, as if they could be ranked in terms of more or less “real” or “important”. At this point, I would like to stress the difficulty of answering questions such as “who is the most powerful – the media producer or the media consumer?”. The accumulated knowledge in both cultural studies and political economy reveals the problems inherent in formulating such a question. As I believe my study has shown, both producers and consumers are in possession of resources which
afford them opportunities to exercise influence or control over the *Transformers* brand world. Simply put, neither group of agents is entirely powerless. However, in order to move the discussion beyond such a crude conclusion, which ultimately proposes a zero-sum game in terms of power distribution and admittedly leads us nowhere, an assessment of the key forms of power, as made manifest in my data and derivable to each group of agents, is called for. In an attempt to capture the forms which can be considered especially relevant in relation to my research focus, the notion of power is discussed along two main axes: 1) *symbolic vs. material power* and 2) *peripheral vs. central power*. Ultimately, drawing on findings presented throughout the thesis, I believe that the subsequent discussion will provide some much needed critical perspectives on fan agency by considering it in a context of what appears to be—despite popular discourses claiming the opposite—largely intact power structures.

### 10.3.1 Symbolic “vs.” Material Power

As revealed in the previous chapter, a “Fiskean” reading of *Transformers* as a site of ‘resistance’ allow us to detect various forms of consumer decoding practices, which potentially constitute challenges to the companies operating behind the brand. While eventually questioned for their status as resistance, these practices should at least be acknowledged as forces potentially disturbing industry operations. To restate earlier findings, such friction was found to form through 1) *alternative meaning-making* (by which consumers opposed or even inverted official discourse), 2) *cultural competence* (by which consumers engaged in different forms of critical reading), and 3) *alternative navigations* (by which consumers side-stepped the expected ways to the film or related paratexts). Ultimately, all of these decoding practices are expressions of the kind of *symbolic* power that fans and other engaged consumers may exercise. Assessing this kind of power then, in relation to the *material power* that establishes through control over means of production especially, represent one logical point-of-entry into what is intended as a continued discussion on power in relation to transmedial world-building.

The symbolic power practiced by *Transformers* fans and identified in my data is, in turn, based on forms of symbolic *capital* (cf. Bourdieu, 1984; 1993b; 1996). Essentially, all three forms of “resistive” fan practice mentioned above required cultural capital in the form of *knowledge*, as well as social capital in the form of *community networks*. Knowledge of popular culture in general and on the object of fandom in particular was earlier in the thesis identified as a central form of cultural capital to consumers and fans especially; not only as a means of fan identity and community construction, but also as a valuable resource to lean on.
when negotiating the value and place of new franchise components. Certainly, this type of knowledge was what allowed some fans to dismiss the anticipated film as “nothing to do with Transformers at all”. Similarly, it was knowledge of this kind that ultimately informed the critical reading practices which surfaced across different parts of my data. Evidently, general insights about, most notably, genre, industry standards, and fan management strategies were what afforded fans to evaluate the substance of various marketing efforts or company decisions. When circulating this kind of knowledge within the frames of community networks, social capital establishes itself as another main resource for the consumers of the Transformers brand. Along with knowledge, these networks are particularly important in relation to the third expression of friction identified above. For, as the ‘Sector Seven’ experience makes particularly evident, alternative pathways become, if not exclusively so at least largely, created through collectively intelligence (Lévy, 1997; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b) in the form of cooperatively accumulated and shared fan knowledge. Likewise, it was community networking that rendered possible the circulation of unsanctioned, copyrighted material within the fan base.

From a political economy perspective, however, even the “empowering”, symbolic powers of consumers ultimately become determined and restricted by material factors. Kellner, for example, in arguing for a ‘multiperspectival’ cultural studies enriched with political economy viewpoints, questions the extent to which audiences actually construct their “own” meanings in a media system that—considering not least the marketing forces which Kellner stresses as central—“may have manipulative effects” (1997, p. 115). If knowledge and community networks constitute significant resources to fans and ultimately produce symbolic power, then control over the means of production is the foundation of the form of material power that allows Hasbro, and its partner companies, to determine the “direction” of the Transformers brand. Now, as Marx’s political economy teaches us, the means of production comprise two key components. First, we have the instruments of labor, which are necessary for producing a commodity. In the era of media convergence, and with the drastic increase in accessible media technology, these instruments have undoubtedly become distributed over a wider spectrum of users than before. Again, the fan quote introducing this section is illuminating. Revealing his/her expectations on the new Transformers film and related promotion, the fan makes the point clearly: “trailers released in a quality that could be trumped by an online fan with a nice computer is not going to cut it”. Obviously, and as also made evident by fan commentary in relation to at least one of the fan trailer videos included in my analysis, the boundaries be-
tween professional and amateur-made productions do tend to dissolve (to re-
mind, some fans mistakenly took the fan-made video to be a studio produc-
tion). While recognizing the importance of this, we should also acknowledge
the digital inequalities which still prevail, locally as well as globally, and which
ultimately restrict partaking in all the more media-based and participatory ente-
rainment franchises. No doubt, symbolic power – not to say advanced textual
productivity and digital sharing – requires material access to commodities and
paratexts for its existence.

Thus, while recognizing that the instruments of labor involved in cultural
production have become more widely accessible to consumers living in areas
with decent material standards, I here want to raise the argument that the se-
cond component included in the means of production, the subject of production,
constitutes Hasbro’s most valuable asset – and one that ultimately remains in
control of the company. In the case of Transformers, and the company’s remain-
ing “content brands” (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 75), this component would include
the brand narrative. Apart from recognizing fan knowledge as a key form
of capital for consumers of Transformers, the previous chapter also stressed the i-
mportance of such narratives as a sort of corporate cultural capital (Lam, 2010). It
was argued that the stories and characters developed in relation to the brand
constitute valuable assets to Hasbro and its partner companies, as they enable
an ongoing reproduction of the brand (into new product categories, media plat-
forms, markets and industrial sectors) and promote brand loyalty (by encourag-
ing affective consumer investments, which in turn makes it “costly” to change
object of fandom). With such in-built potentials, the Transformers brand narra-
tive can arguably be identified as a corporate key resource; a conclusion which
is backed up by corporate documents emphasizing the value of branded con-
tent as well as by interviewed professionals stressing the importance of imme-
sive stories. As has also been suggested, it would be precisely the captivating
content connected to the Transformers brand – or any other entertainment prop-
erty – that lies at the roots of fan labor. In the end, the narrative is a means of
production that fans may utilize and borrow for the sake of pleasure, but really
cannot control. As stressed in the previous section, it is the company’s control
over this raw material that ultimately puts it in charge of the spatial expansion
of the Transformers world. And as recognized by Jenkins too, “Within the cultur-
al economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must con-
textualize our celebration of popular resistance” (1992b, p. 27).
10.3.2 Peripheral “vs.” central power

As my acquaintance with my area and object of research has advanced, through reviews of previous research as well as empirical analyses, the spatial dimension of brands like Transformers has become increasingly tangible. Indeed, the metaphors frequently used in this and other studies to describe these branded spaces, such as ‘worlds’ (cf. Klastrup & Tosca, 2004), ‘universes’ (cf. Ryan, 1985; Kline, 1993, p. 323; Örnebring, 2007), or ‘fields’ even, involve recognition of such a dimension, as do metaphors of more or less leaking ‘boundaries’ between various units of relevance here. In addition, both top-down and bottom-up spatialization processes have been found to contribute to the growth of these brands into new product categories, media platforms and industrial sectors, but also into new fan domains. Logically, every space has outer and inner areas. While previously in this thesis it has been argued that the boundaries between such areas tend to dissolve as they are interwoven by increasing number of paratexts, it still seems possible to distinguish between marginal and central forms of power, operating within worlds of transmedial entertainment. As another way to assess the producer-consumer relationship in terms of power then, I shall in this section point to the relation between peripheral and central forms of power respectively.

As my analysis of the ‘Sector Seven’ experience made particularly evident, official and unofficial paratexts tend to flow in and out of each other. The fan blog included in the analysis of this particular marketing initiative can be conceived of as an additional, unendorsed platform for participation in the transmedial mystery that the campaign constituted, especially by forming an arena for collective intelligence in relation to its contents. Add to this the incorporation of fan-made contents into marketing campaigns (such as on SectorSeven.org), homage to fan domains in official texts (such as the logotype of fan community TFW2005 placed in the actual 2007 Transformers film), or the use of fan forums as alternative marketing channels (such as in the case of the ‘Ultimate Press Kit’-delivery to Seibertron), and it becomes hard to deny that official and unofficial brand spaces seem to merge too. Certainly, cases like these suggest that fans have had their positions advanced in relation to the producers. They seem, in short, to have moved closer to the spheres in which the Transformers brand become officially built and promoted.

In the context of the 2007 movie verse, these spheres were largely controlled by Hasbro in corporation with more or less remote promotional partners, as illustrated in figure 10.1 below. Together, the companies represented in this figure – and others occupying similar positions – can be said to have provided
the raw material to the 2007 movie verse by adding a range of commodities and official marketing paratexts to it. Importantly then, the figure accounts for the commercial actors involved in the 2007 version of the "Transformers" brand world; the fans, as shown, may well become engaged with material offered by companies within any of the figure’s circles.

Figure 10.1: Peripheral and central areas of the 2007 Transformers movie verse

While the companies within the A and the B spheres would be responsible for the fundamental structure and core contents of the film franchise, the companies in C and D certainly added volume and density by contributing tie-in commodities, merchandise and promotional contents. Arguably though, the farther away from the core circle, the less essential the textual contributions from involved companies would appear; not to the consumers necessarily – certainly, the value of promotional paratexts as frameworks of interpretation (Gray, 2010) or as a means of community construction has been acknowledged in this study too – but to the foundations of the franchise per se. From this then, it can also be assumed that, irrespective of its unique value to fans of the "Transformers" franchise and despite its power to add substance to the movie verse, fan paratextual productivity adds “flesh” to an already existent and carefully crafted frame at best. The textual “skeleton” of the 2007 film franchise was built by Hasbro and the company’s strategic allies.

Furthermore, given what has been stressed above about imagined and symbolic powers, as well as in earlier sections about fan labor, we should arguably not jump to the conclusion that fan mobilization to the central spheres of offi-
cial production automatically equals fan empowerment. After all, there are reasons to ask whether it is the fans that have moved closer to the areas of official production, or if the reverse is more true. As suggested in this and other studies (cf. Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2007; Baym, 2009; Milner, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Yang, 2009; Martens, 2011; Sandvoss, 2011), companies are becoming increasingly aware of the value of consumer activity and way well welcome free labor into the inner areas of entertainment production. With respect to this then, it seems increasingly necessary to remind of Morley’s warning that we should not “mistake audience activity for power” but that we should recognize that “the consumer’s ability to choose options from within a present menu is a very limited form of power, compared to that of the institutions that construct those menus” (2006, p. 115). By all means, the more fans get involved in the production process on a voluntary basis, and the more influence they gain on their object of fandom without receiving a “pay-check”, the greater the reasons to talk about fan productivity as a potential source of exploitation.

10.4 Concluding remarks and remaining knowledge gaps

The aim of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of the increasingly complex relationship between producers and consumers in the context of transmedial worlds of entertainment, such as the one built around the Transformers brand in general and the 2007 Transformers film franchise in particular. A special focus – elaborated in this and the preceding chapter – has been on how power is being executed by various agents in the context of the brand building process, and against the background of the anything but concluded debate on the implications of convergence culture on social relations. In order to accomplish this aim, this thesis has drawn on perspectives offered by both cultural studies and political economy research, and employed a multi-method, full-circuit methodology. Admittedly, even assessed with a relatively ambitious research design like this, the issue of power remains painfully elusive. What I believe my study has beneficially offered are insights into how producer and consumer power might take shape and become distributed between agents – in real-life, local, and specific, yet nonetheless contextualized, situations.

Before moving onto identifying some of the “gaps” which remain to be resolved through future research, I would like to make some final remarks in regard to what has been suggested in this chapter in relation to power, and in the last few sections especially. Importantly, I realize that the insertion of the “versus”-term in the headings above (see sections 10.3.1 and 10.3.2) along with the arguments raised under each of these headings, promote an idea that these
forms of power are mutually exclusive; that either one form or the other is exercised. Following from what has been suggested, it would seem that producers alone are in possession of “heavyweight” forms of power such as the material and central, whereas consumers, consequently, have to make do with “light” forms of power such the symbolic and peripheral. While it does seem legitimate to draw the conclusion that the distribution of power between producers and consumers is organized along these broad lines, or that producers hold superior positions in relation to consumers in the brand-building process, I certainly do not intend to obscure the complexities involved here. Assumably, all forms of power could be exercised by agents from both groups, yet again, an unequal distribution of capital resources and positions within the sub-field render certain patterns of power distribution more or less likely to occur. Additionally, while the industry, through unbeatable amounts of influence and control, is in charge of the “direction” of brand worlds like Transformers, the consumers in the end hold “exhibitability” power; that is, they own the privilege or supremacy to step out of these worlds (given of course, that they are ready to “sacrifice” the cultural capital invested in this particular sub-field, as suggested previously in section 9.5.2). Under the constant pressure to become active and productive, such consumer power would perhaps ultimately rest on the consumers’ abilities to stay passive and unproductive in relation to transmedial entertainment (Baudrillard, 1993; Andrejevic, 2009). Such a mode of reception, however, is certainly incompatible with fan culture, where involvement is everything.

The expectations on fans and other consumers to become “immersed” in brand experiences and partake in brand-building processes are hardly likely to abate in a time when social media and user-generating techniques become increasingly everyday phenomena, and when strategic brand management becomes all the more sophisticated. Hence, while the last few years of research on active consumers have provided us with a valuable basis for understanding the matters discussed in this thesis, we need to continue exploring the consequences of media convergence on the producer-consumer power relationship. As suggested in my preceding chapter, a better understanding of capital conversion in relation to consumer labor is utterly needed. While I believe this study has provided valuable insights into how and why consumers, and fans especially, may contribute to the commercial success of a brand, I strongly welcome research that will enable us to also understand to what extent, and with what effects (on social relations as well as on actual brand value) such capital translation actually takes place.
References

Books and academic articles


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Symposion.


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Journalistic contents


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Other contents (press releases, community news items, wikis, etc.)

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*Transformers media resources*


*Videos*

‘Fanaticon’ contest video no.1: *Transformers* trailer: Brand new cut April 2007. As of April 12, 2012, the video could be accessed via URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXGb6T7Ed-0

‘Fanaticon’ contest video no.2: *Transformers* mashup trailer 1984-2007. As of April 12, 2012, the video could be accessed via URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hCrOKqBmsg

General Motors’ *Transformers*-themed TV-spots. As of October 20, 2012, all five videos could be accessed via URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB9RFVsVo0&feature=results_video&play next=1&list=PLB963B42292A586F2

The Second Life press conference. As of October 3, 2012, a video of the press conference could be accessed via URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4_VVU8w6k0
The viral videos on the Sector Seven website. As of October 20, all four videos could be accessed via URL (by help of latest password, 'deceptibot'):

Websites

http://www.autoassembly.org.uk
http://www.autobotsrollout.com (part of the GM promotion, no longer available)
http://www.buzznet.com/groups/stopsectorseven
http://www.chevyautobots.com (part of the GM promotion, no longer available)
http://www.donmurphy.net
http://www.hasbro.com
http://www.michaelbay.com
http://www.myspace/transformers
http://www.ntfa.net
http://www.secondlife.com
http://www.sectorseven.org (still accessible via the password 'deceptibot')
http://www.TFW2005.com
http://www.transformers.com
http://www.transformersmovie.com
http://www.transformersgame.com
http://www.transformersalbum.com
http://www.transformerslive.blogspot.com
http://www.vector-sigma.org
Appendices

This section includes the interview guides used in my conversations with professional producers and focus group respondents. While some of my interviews were conducted in Swedish, the guides below have all been translated into English. The interview guide for the focus groups is organized thematically, with the questions covering different topics of relevance. Also included in this section is the “union” model used in my focus group interviews as well as the “respondent’s background” sheet handed out in relation to these.

Appendix 1: Interview guides – Professional producers

1.1 United International Pictures (Mats Jörgen, Marketing Manager, Stockholm)

Before the interview:

Inform the respondent about the purpose of the study and the interviews.
Inform the respondent about their rights to anonymity and the confidential nature of the data.

Which are the most central channels for film marketing in general?
What role do trailer movies play in a general film marketing campaign?
How was the 2007 Transformers film marketed in Sweden?
What collaborations took place between UIP and Hasbro around the 2007 Transformers film?
What influence does UIP have on the regional marketing of a film like Transformers?
What target group was the 2007 Transformers film aimed at?
Was the marketing campaign for the 2007 Transformers film successful?
What is UIP’s relationship to the Transformers fans?
Did you contact any Transformers fan community before the release of the film?
How important are cross-promotions in the selling of a film like Transformers?

Follow-up questions

When, where and in what order did the various elements of the Transformers film marketing campaign unfold (e.g. trailer videos, TV-advertising, etc.)?
Was UIP/Paramount Pictures involved in the arrangement of any competitions in Sweden specifically?
Do you think that the film marketing campaign rolled out in Sweden was different from that launched in the U.S. or other parts of Europe?
How did UIP collaborate with SF in conjunction with the 2007 Transformers film?
When did the pre-release of the film to the media take place in Sweden?
Were there any other events specific to the Swedish market?
What was the exact target group for the 2007 Transformers film?
How do you prepare for the release of the second Transformers film?
May I get a copy of the campaign plan for the Transformers film?

1.2 Hasbro Nordic (Hans-Christian Ulrich, Marketing Manager, Copenhagen)

Before the interview:

Inform the respondent about the purpose of the study and the interviews.
Inform the respondent about their rights to anonymity and the confidential nature of the data.

What do you think makes the Transformers brand special?
How has the brand developed over time?
What is Hasbro’s relationship to Transformers fans?
Did Hasbro Nordic contact any Transformers fan community before the release of the film?
What companies did Hasbro collaborate with in conjunction with the release of the 2007 Transformers film?
How were the film-related Transformers toys marketed in Sweden?
What impact did the 2007 Transformers film have on the toy sales?
What impact did the 2007 Transformers film have on the brand at large?

1.3 Kidz Entertainment (Karola Hesselberg-Thomsen, Sr Brand Manager, Copenhagen)

Before the interview:

Inform the respondent about the purpose of the study and the interviews.
Inform the respondent about their rights to anonymity and the confidential nature of the data.

What is Kidz Entertainment’s relationship to Hasbro, as a license agency?
How did Kidz Entertainment cooperate with Hasbro, the film studios or other companies in conjunction with the 2007 Transformers film?
How many licenses are there on the Transformers brand right now?
How involved was Kidz Entertainment in the marketing of the 2007 film?
What Transformers film merchandise sold the best?
What strategic considerations are made when selling a license?
How do Kidz Entertainment prevent a brand name from being used the wrong way or pirate copied?

1.4 Activision Blizzard Nordic AB (Anders Wistam, Sales Manager, Stockholm)

Before the interview:

Inform the respondent about the purpose of the study and the interviews.
Inform the respondent about their rights to anonymity and the confidential nature of the data.

What role did Activision play in the launch of the 2007 Transformers film?
Who initiated the making of a 2007 Transformers game?
Which were the primary marketing channels for the 2007 Transformers game?
Did you collaborate with any specific partner companies in Sweden to market the game?

Was the marketing campaign for the 2007 Transformers game successful?

What influence does Activision Nordic have on the regional marketing of a game like Transformers?

The 2007 Transformers game has brand placements in it – what are your considerations when it comes to such types of advertising?

What target group was the 2007 Transformers game aimed at?

1.5 Simon Furman (Author/Writer)

Before the interview:

Inform the respondent about the purpose of the study and the interviews.
Inform the respondent about their rights to anonymity and the confidential nature of the data.

What does Transformers mean to you today?

What do you think it is that keeps this franchise going?

How much impact have you had on the Transformers narrative?

What has inspired your writing?

Do you consider yourself a Transformers fan?

Do you think that many of the professionals involved with the Transformers brand are fans themselves?

How do you think the Transformers brand has changed over time?

What is your relationship to Transformers fans?

What are your ideas about fan-fiction?

Do you think that the industry at large is in a good relationship with fans?

Why did you choose to attend this convention?

What do you imagine the Transformers brand to be like in the next future years?
Appendix 2: Interview guide – Focus group interviews

The NordCon fan convention, June 19-20, 2010, Aalborg, Denmark

2.1 Introduction

- Welcome everybody and thank them for participating
- Introduce myself
- Inform them about the study
- Inform them about the purpose of the study and the interviews
- Inform them about their rights to anonymity and the confidential nature of the data
- Distribute respondents background sheet (see 'Appendix 4')
- Short round of presentations

Introducing questions

1. If I say Transformers, what is the first thing that you come to think of?
2. If I would have posed the same question 10 years ago, what would your answer have been?
3. What makes Transformers so special?
4. Why did you choose to attend/arrange this convent?

2.2 Themes

1. The role of Transformers in your life
2. The meaning of being a Transformers fan
3. The essence of Transformers
4. Experiences of Transformers marketing
5. The companies behind Transformers
6. The future of Transformers

Theme 1: The role of Transformers in your life

1. How much time do you spend on Transformers-related activities per week? Each day?
2. How did your interest in Transformers begin?
3. What has kept this interest alive?
4. What does your relationship to Transformers look like today?
5. How does your interest in Transformers show?
6. At what point in time was your dedication for Transformers the biggest? How did this show?
7. What would make your interest increase?
8. What would make your interest decrease?

Theme 2: The meaning of being a Transformers fan

1. Do you identify yourself as a Transformers fan?
2. How do you become a Transformers fan?
3. For how long have you been a Transformers fan?
4. Who is NOT a *Transformers* fan?
5. What makes fans different from “regular” consumers? When do you go from being a consumer to being a fan?
6. What does the “typical” *Transformers* fan look like?
7. Do *Transformers* fans differ from other fans in any ways?
8. Do many of your friends share your interest?
9. Are you often in contact with other *Transformers* fans?
10. How do you keep contact with other fans?
11. What has the Internet and the social media meant for your engagement in *Transformers*?
12. What does the NTFA-community mean to you?
13. Do you habitually participate in other *Transformers* communities? Which ones? How do you engage?
14. Is there something that could happen that would end your engagement in *Transformers*?

**Theme 3: The essence of *Transformers***

As an introduction to this theme, I would ask you to do a little assignment. *Hand out the ‘onion’-model* (see ‘Appendix 3’). On this paper, I would like you to write the names of the brands or products that you regard as central to the *Transformers* universe. *Give the respondents enough time for everyone to fill in the model and collect.*

1. Is there a general agreement amongst you as fans as to which products or brands are central within the *Transformers* franchise (e.g. the toys, films, comics, etc.)?
2. Is there any canon or hierarchy among the brands or products? What does it look like? How has it developed?
3. Are there, in your opinion, any products or brands within the franchise which do not belong there? Which? Why?
4. Are there any types of products which should not be wearing the *Transformers*-logo, you think?
5. How do you think Hasbro handles the *Transformers* brand?
6. If you were given the opportunity to purchase the *Transformers* brand from Hasbro, how would you handle it? In what directions would you develop it?
7. Do you think that your image or understanding of *Transformers* is the same as the companies’ that owns it?

**Theme 4: Experiences of *Transformers* marketing**

1. When the first *Transformers* movie came out in 2007, it was accompanied by a lot of marketing – do you remember any of this?
2. Was there any particular campaign that you remember? In what ways was that campaign special?
3. Compared to other film releases of the same kind – is there anything that makes the *Transformers* marketing stand out in any way?
4. How do you think *Transformers* is presented in the marketing?
5. What target groups do you think the film marketing is aimed at? How does this show?
6. Have you ever participated in any marketing campaign, e.g. a contest or a competition?

**Theme 5: The companies behind *Transformers***

Questions 9-13 were aimed specifically at the participating convention arrangers.

1. How do you think the companies that own *Transformers* regard you as fans? Do they treat you differently in comparison to “regular” consumers? In which ways?
2. How do you think the companies looks upon you as a community?
3. Are you valuable to the companies in any way? How?
4. Have you ever been in contact with for example Hasbro or any other Transformers-related company? Why? Why not?
5. What are your thoughts on your relationship with the companies behind Transformers?
6. When you communicate with the companies, who usually initiate the contact? How do you communicate?
7. Have you ever received something in exchange for your efforts? What? In what context? Why?
8. Have the companies ever requested something from you? What? When? Why?
9. Did you, as a community, have any personal contact with people at Hasbro or any other Transformers-related company prior to the 2007 film? What did this contact look like? Who initiated it? Did you exchange any kind of services or things?
10. What is your relationship to other Transformers communities?
11. What companies did you approach prior to this convention? Why? What responses did you get from these companies? In what ways have they contributed to this convention?
12. Have you been approached by any company prior to this convention?
13. What does it mean to be a sponsor of this convention?
14. Do you create your own Transformers “products”, e.g. fan-fiction, fan-art, fan-videos? Why?
15. Apart from what is on your community, have you written any reviews, made interviews or produced articles related to Transformers?
16. Do you ever read or look at what other fans have created? Why? Why not?
17. Have you ever made your creations available to the companies behind Transformers? In what context?
18. Who create Transformers?

Theme 6: The future of Transformers

1. How do you look upon the future for Transformers as a brand? How will it develop?
2. What will “shape” the franchise during the next years to come, you think?
3. What are your ideas about your relationship to Transformers in 10/20/30 years from now? How will your engagement change?
4. For how long will you remain a Transformers fan?
5. Will the franchise continue to grow? For how long? When will it end? Why?
6. Will future generations engage in Transformers you think?
2.3 List of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Degree of interest in <em>Transformers</em> (on a scale of 1-7, where 1 is lowest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus group 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1.1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>3/5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2.1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3.1</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3.1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus group 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1.2</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2.2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2.3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus group 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1.3</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This respondent provided two figures when asked to estimate his/her degree of interest in *Transformers*. The lower figure was said to represent the degree of interest in relation to “fans”, and the lower to “the general public”.
What is Transformers?
Please write the names of Transformers-brands/-products in the circles below according to their importance.
Most important should be placed in the inner-circle.
Appendix 4: “Respondent’s background”-sheet

Respondent’s background

NordCon, June 19-20, 2010, Aalborg

Name __________________ (voluntary)

Age____________________

Gender_________________

Nationality______________

Estimated degree of interest in Transformers:
(please mark one of the numbers below)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Low                   High
More than Meets the Eye

This study digs beneath the surface of one of today’s most popular entertainment franchises, Hasbro’s *Transformers*, to explore power relations. Over the years, this franchise has developed into a transmedial world of entertainment, in which consumers are expected to become seriously immersed. Integrated marketing campaigns encourage various kinds of fan productivity and invite consumers to partake in the brand-building process. Consumers are thus increasingly counted on to act as co-producers of contemporary entertainment.

While such an altered consumer identity has been taken as evidence of enhanced consumer agency, it has also been recognized as a source of free labor. Through an integrated theoretical approach, the study offers a better understanding of the values of consumer activity, and fan productivity in particular, to industry and consumers respectively. The findings suggest that the enjoyment that consumers derive from engaging deeply in their object of fandom potentially translates into industrial benefits, including free brand promotion. Ultimately, the thesis acknowledges transmedial worlds of entertainment as concurrent sites of pleasure, resistance, and exploitation.