LEARNING TO SHARE
THE RELATIONAL LOGICS
OF MEDIA FRANCHISING

Derek Johnson
University of North Texas
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Introduction

In the contemporary media environment, it has become increasingly commonplace—and commonsense—to refer to successful, long-running intellectual properties as “franchises.” In May 2010, for example, Advertising Age made sense of the sale of Snoopy, Woodstock, and the rest of Charles Shultz’s Peanuts gang to the Iconix Brand Group in these terms, valuating the history of the property and its continuing potential in the global media marketplace by exclaiming “It’s a Great Franchise, Charlie Brown” (Bulik 2010). This metaphor for making sense of media properties extends beyond trade discourse, with popular blogs also participating in the franchise conversation. In a recent post later picked up by Yahoo! News, Life’s Little Mysteries blogger Mike Avila meditates on the media franchise by trying to determine “the most successful movie franchise of all time.” Having decided to make box office revenue the deciding factor, Avila awards the crown to the Harry Potter series and its $5.4 billion in ticket sales—but with the caveat that Star Wars would gain an advantage if merchandising were to be considered, while the James Bond films exceed both in terms of overall longevity.

Such posts contribute to an overall popular understanding of the media franchise as the result of ongoing management of a property across time and various markets, corroborating the perceptions of industry insiders like Disney’s Robert Iger, who similarly defines franchise as “something that creates value across multiple businesses and across multiple territories over a long period of time” (Siklos 2009). The economic meanings carried by this metaphor, however, have also been negotiated by those working creatively with these properties, whose individual interests and energies must be asserted in the face of all this successful brand maintenance. Reflecting on the conclusion of the TV series Lost in 2010, producer Carlton Cuse notes: “We certainly understand and absolutely respect that ABC and Disney has an incredibly valuable franchise and they want to do more things with Lost, but the story we’re telling ends in May” (Chozick 2010). Because Lost is understood in this way as one of the most successful television franchises of the early twenty-first century, Cuse finds it necessary as a stakeholder to reassert the role of creative individuality within the perpetual corporate management of the shared property.
This notion of media franchising, therefore, shapes how analysts, executives, creators, and popular audiences each imagine the media industries of the contemporary moment. And as Cuse’s attempt to position his work outside perceptions of franchising demonstrates, this metaphor is a particularly loaded one, often negatively connoting corporate control and exploitation of a cash cow at the expense of independence and artistry. Without a doubt, many of these connotations come from the wider cultural history of franchising. Prior to the industrial revolution, a franchise was conceived primarily in the political terms of enfranchisement. Derived from the French franchir (to free), the word “franchise” conveyed one’s right to participate and pursue one’s interests free of constraint. Within a collective system such as electoral politics, the franchise was, by and large, a freely determined individual vote. However, as historians of marketing such as Harry Kursh argue, this free right to participate took on more economic—and more sinister—connotations by the nineteenth century, as emerging tycoons “slit each other’s corporate throats” in fierce competition to be awarded “franchise” rights over utilities, railroads, and other elements of public infrastructure (1968: 194). According to scholar T.S. Dicke, the term acquired an additional use around 1959, newly deployed to describe business systems in which corporate franchisors operating on a national level develop a trademarked system of doing business enter into contractual relations with franchisees who pay a fee to independently operate outlets on the local level (1992: 2).

It is from this usage that most consumers understand global business operations such as McDonald’s restaurants, Meineke auto shops, or Best Western hotels. Thus, as industry analysts in Variety, Hollywood Reporter, and other sites of trade discourse began in the early 1990s to make sense of media content and its production as “franchising” (moving the term beyond existing usage to describe the assignment of broadcasting licenses and municipal cable monopolies as franchise rights to infrastructure), the term brought with it a great deal of historical and cultural baggage. To think about media culture as franchise is to think about it in the same terms that make sense of fast food. And in the same way that critics like George Ritzer (2000) have lamented the increasing standardization and rationalized control of culture as what he calls the “McDonaldization” of society, the articulation of media to fast food reflects allows the latter to act as cultural shorthand for the inadequacies of the former.
So while media franchising has been frequently invoked in industrial, popular, and scholarly discourse, perceptions of its economic determinism and its lack of cultural value have at least partially sidelined specific attempts to understand what the franchising of media culture actually means. In most accounts, the media franchise is a rather simple effect, figured most often as a product of increasing corporate power and conglomeration or as the endgame for intellectual property management strategies. Even as Henry Jenkins (2006), for one potentially divergent example, considers the franchised intellectual property more productively as a site where new forms of narrative practice and cultural collaboration have emerged, the media franchise is positioned and understood in relation to the larger patterns of convergence culture and transmedia storytelling. Nevertheless, media franchising is a phenomenon in its own right, not confined to specifically transmedia considerations, as properties like Law & Order and CSI have become understood as franchises for their multiplication within the single medium of television. Similarly, in The Frodo Franchise, scholar Kristin Thompson (2007) offers a detailed picture of the Lord of the Rings franchise, but in arguing about its exceptional character, her book offers only a limited perspective on the phenomenon of media franchising at large.

But what can we learn from the logic of franchising itself? What does it tell us about how cultural production and creative collaboration might work? How can we make use of this understanding? With much of this phenomenon remaining to be explored by media researchers, this project aims to directly confront and deconstruct the cultural logics of franchising in order to understand it not as the effected product of other issues and forces, but as a process and set of relationships that have historically produced culture. Though the notion of the franchise carries with it much cultural baggage, those entrenched meanings and values accompany a very specific logic for organizing and making sense of cultural production sustained over time and across multiple market sectors. By developing a detailed, historical portrait of what franchising is and how it has worked, we will deepen our understanding of how culture has been collaboratively produced and consumed across decentralized networks of “enfranchised” stakeholders. To that end, this inquiry combines current research trajectories in media and cultural studies with conceptual models drawn from the fields of marketing and organizational communication to make sense of media franchising as a social practice. This approach demands we consider franchising not solely in terms of texts, products, brands, or properties, but also through power-laden, networked relationships between franchisors and franchisees with distinct interests in the shared cultural resources of the franchise. By combining analysis of trade press with archival research and original interviews with media professionals, this project examines how these shared resources have been deployed, managed, and sustained in specific historical instances by media institutions, creative personnel, and even consumers invested in them.
Key Findings

Ultimately, this study recognizes that any attempt to define the media franchise once and for all is an exercise in futility, as its slippery cultural meanings are perhaps what make it such a versatile means of understanding a wide variety of media practices. Nonetheless, by arguing that franchising offers a cultural structure through which media content, media institutions, and media audiences have been put into productive relations, this study helps point to the relational, collaborative logic that defines a franchised culture. From this perspective, five key findings will be delivered to demonstrate the value of comprehending franchising as a structure for organizing collaborative cultural production:

1) **The Cultural Logic of Franchising is Relational**: franchising must be understood as relational given its dependence on sustained, strategic relationships between stakeholders with unequal interest in shared cultural resources; franchises are not reflective of intellectual property monopolies, but instead negotiation of imperfectly aligned interests.

2) **Franchising Drives Institutional Relationships**: the cultural networks constituted by franchising have not merely bolstered the power of “big media” institutions, but rather, in driving institutional relationships, have created tensions, cleavages and challenges to be negotiated by conglomerates and upstarts alike. The franchise strategies of companies like Marvel Comics, when most successful, have depended upon institutional partnerships.

3) **Franchising Supports Creative Relationships**: franchising must also be understood with respect to creative relationships, in that it has enabled co-creation and collaboration through decentralized, emergent uses of shared story worlds. Users of properties like Battlestar Galactica must negotiate not only the structure of a shared set of narrative resources, but also hierarchies of creative power that encourage and constrain creative uses of them.

4) **Franchising Generates Consumer- Constituent Relationships**: as shared cultural resources, franchised worlds have supported what can be described as consumer-constituent relationships. Invited to invest at a variety of productive, affective, and even civic levels, consumers act as defacto franchisees, pursuing their own economic and political interests in the institutional and creative management of programs like 24.

5) **Franchising Extends Transnational and Transgenerational Relationships**: franchises support transnational and transgenerational relations through ongoing exchange, transformation, and reinvestment. Franchises like Transformers can be most productively understood not as globally traded products, but as cultural processes in which local innovations feed cross-cultural networks of production over long periods of time.
From these findings, this project theorizes the culture of media franchising to uncover an established tradition of collaborative production in the entertainment industries. As a cultural logic structuring production in relational terms, the media franchise might therefore be considered, despite its more historical, less cutting-edge character, a crucial corollary to any attempt to understand emerging “social media.”

The Cultural Logic of Franchising is Relational

To understand how the media culture began to be imagined in terms of franchises, it is first necessary to understand the organizational logics implied by the wider discourse of franchising prior to its application to the production of content and the management of intellectual property by media corporations. While a full cultural history of franchising falls well outside the scope of this project, one particularly crucial moment in the formation of a cultural and industrial logic of franchising was the “franchise boom” of late 1950s America. The postwar economy brought many changes to the American economy, among them an increasing suburbanization that spatially reorganized consumer life by moving them away from urban retail and service centers. Though corporations had for decades relied on models of market expansion through contractual relations with independent operators in local markets that we would recognize today as “franchising,” this model proved particularly suited as a corporate response to the new social realities of the 1950s. Companies could open a great number of new outlets nationwide with minimal capital investment by relying on smaller firms who wanted to be in business for themselves, asking those local operators to invest their own money in the business in exchange for access to a proven business model, shared trademarks, and strategic support. In this push for corporate relations with independent operators, such arrangements increasingly came to be understood and imagined in the specific terms of “franchising.”
Much of these new understandings came from market researchers and self-help gurus that sought to make sense of the new opportunities emerging in this postwar economy. One of the first thinkers to conceptualize these contractual relationships in franchising terms was David Schwartz, a researcher at the Georgia State University School of Business Administration. Writing in 1959, Schwartz developed a research paper that lays out the basic principles under which franchised business operations can and should operate. As part of that research, Schwartz identified a central challenge in the management of a franchise business, in that despite sharing business models and trademarks, different stakeholders in the franchise with different levels and types of investments pursued their own interests within the contractual relationship. Franchisors who innovated the system, for example, aimed to maximize profitability and standardization across the entire franchise, whereas local franchisees pursued the strategies that most benefited their specific situation. To make the system work, Schwartz argued, each party had to recognize the needs of the other and demonstrate a willingness to compromise: “Franchisees must be willing to sacrifice some independence of action and conform to a substantial degree to the franchisor’s methods,” he wrote. “By the same token, franchisors must accept the fact that complete control over the franchise outlet is impossible” (1959: 23). Thus, despite the terms of the partnership between national and local firms having been contractually defined, the franchise relationship remained a site of ongoing negotiation between unequal stakeholders. Writing a self-help guide for small businessmen and women interested in starting their own franchise outlets a decade later, Harry Kursh echoed this sentiment in arguing that “[t]he key to a successful franchise is continuing relations” (1968: xi). Though the contract may have laid out economic terms, the actual operation of the franchise depended on an ongoing social practice filled with potential tensions and cleavages derived from each stakeholder’s ongoing and varied interests. Such factors have shaped academic perceptions of franchising into the twenty-first century, with researchers like Peter Birkeland continuing to examine the conflicts, antagonisms, and “inherent tensions” in the franchisor-franchisee relationship that extend from their misaligned goals for and uses of shared resources (2002: 149).

What results from these accounts is a picture of franchising as an imperfect system based on negotiated relationships between unequal parties. As an industrial logic, therefore, the franchise systems of the second half of the twentieth century must be understood as social in nature, and not merely economic. If we are then to make sense of the media industries in terms of franchising, it follows that we should consider such structures as similarly relational in nature, consisting of intellectual property innovators who share those resources, however imperfectly, within and across a number of independent media firms. The processes by which media have been franchised over the past several decades includes not just practices of sharing, but the discursive act of understanding that exchange as a kind of franchising akin to the retail models that took hold in the postwar American economy.
However, none of this is to say that media franchises are entirely analogous to the organizational models that have supported economic and cultural institutions like McDonald’s. Media franchises and retail/service franchises are not the same things. First and foremost, the retail/service model of franchising most often serves as a functional equivalent to vertical integration (Blair and Lafontaine 2005: 1), allowing corporations with control of product distribution and marketing to farm out their production and/or sales operations. A company like Coca-Cola farms out its soda recipe to local bottlers, who actually produce the stuff, while fast food franchises in control of a standardized product use franchisees to multiply the number of storefronts that might reach consumers. In the case of the media franchise, however, the goal is largely a horizontal integration. Rather than acquire vertical control of a single product, the media franchise expands the range of product offerings across markets: from an Iron Man comic to Iron Man television series, toys, and video games, perhaps. Instead of multiplying the number of outlets that deliver product to consumers, media franchises multiply the number of products those outlets deliver. If anything, producer-distributor attempts to build relations with independent media exhibition firms—television networks signing local affiliates, for example—more closely resemble retail/service franchise models. The media franchise, therefore, is more about expanded production of content than it is expanded delivery of product. As a result, that content is therefore more aptly understood as serially produced than mass produced, in that each franchise outlet works in relation to one another, but seeks to distinguish and modulate one sequel or ancillary good from the last (whereas no one at a McDonald’s franchise is expected to come up with new hamburger recipes). Second, the content recognized as media franchising is not always the product of the cooperation of patently independent firms. Companies like ABC-Disney have enough subsidiary holdings that a franchise like High School Musical can sometimes be horizontally extended without licensing the participation of a second party. The franchise can have no official franchisee.
Despite these significant differences, it can be productively argued that the relational logic of franchising still holds in extension from retail and service industries to the media sector. Ongoing collaborative relations between unequal parties persist, merely shifted from vertical market structures to the realm of production and design of a multiplicity of horizontal products. In many ways this shift in franchising logic could be considered part of a wider neo-Fordist shift towards flexible production, and in the case of the media industries specifically, the increased significance of content brands in a fragmented market where consumers can be reached by such a wide variety of channels (Curtin and Streeter 2001; Murray 2005). In a neo-Fordist media economy, it perhaps makes more sense to franchise content than to franchise exhibition outlets. As a result, the media franchise can be conceived as a dynamic set of shared cultural resources for ongoing, decentralized relations of content production. Moreover, even though corporate conglomeration often makes formal franchise contracts unnecessary, licensed productions do persist, and even in the case of corporate synergy, stakeholders with unequal interests must still negotiate unequal relationships with one another. As Andrew Currah (2006) explains, subsidiary companies tend to be managed as separate fiefdoms, with division leaders mindful of their own bottom lines and the potential benefits of any collaboration to their own relative positions within the company. In addition to social stratification at the executive level, “for-hire” contracts at the creative level reintroduce ongoing, negotiated relationships to the media franchise by limiting contributor’s ability to exert perfect and perpetual control over the development of a property. As a relationship between parties, therefore, the franchise system contains within it unstable elements that must be negotiated over time in social practice. To operate, media franchises have to develop relationships based on cooperation and perceived common interest despite all the economic disparities and countervailing interests between stakeholders.

Ultimately, it matters that media culture has been described in terms of franchising. “Franchise” is not a culturally neutral term, not only in the way that it reimagines industrial economies, but also in the way that it valuates such relations. In 2002, for example, Newsweek declared that Hollywood was in the midst of “franchise fever,” critiquing the film industry’s reliance on sequel and merchandise extensions by quipping that “[a] franchise movie typically works backward from the Happy Meal to the plot” (Horn 2002: 58). While this article evidenced popular understanding of media as a franchised culture, it simultaneously devalued that notion by reinforcing the articulation of franchising to fast food outlets like McDonald’s (particularly maligned in that moment by books like 2001’s Fast Food Nation). Though valid in many respects, the associations between the serialized production of media content and franchised retail outlets has often justified their intellectual dismissal as the simplistic detritus of marketing over culture. However, by focusing on the continuing relationships implied by this same model for organizing and imagining the production of culture, we can challenge such dismissals by calling attention to franchising as a central site of social collaboration and negotiation within the media industries.
Franchising Drives Institutional Relationships

In most political economic analyses, franchises like Star Wars and Batman are assumed to be effects of conglomeration, consolidation, and the power of “big media” companies. In such cases, the ubiquity of such properties is perceived by critics as reflective of the market reach of 20th Century Fox and Time Warner, respectively. The multiplication of content production is directly correlated to the multiplication of distributional controls over the mediascape. However, an examination of franchising concerned with its relational logic recognizes the way in which the multiplication of content product serves economic, social, and cultural exchange across corporate lines.

In the 1980s and 1990s, franchise strategies emerged as much from smaller, independent, and localized firms on the margins of specific media industries as it did from emerging conglomerates with their hands in multiple markets. The push toward sequelization and serialized, ongoing production models, for example, was a primary strategy used by media firms to grab market share from a position on the relative margins of the media industries. In the film market, New Line Cinema realized that in order to support its core business of distributing independently produced films with far lower profiles than those marketed by the majors, it could rely upon a franchise strategy to keep at least one Nightmare on Elm Street or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles film slated for production each year. The steady, predictable profit from those films supported a significant percentage of their distribution slate from 1987 to 1993 (Wyatt 1998: 77). The extension of Ninja Turtles from its original comic book iteration into film, therefore, came not from big media power, but the ability of New Line and property steward Mirage Comics to identify complementary interests in the same resources. Moreover, this is a model that the major studios would only later embrace (Bart 2006: 3). While television had relied upon seriality and even character spin-offs for some time, that same 1980s to 1990s era saw producers working in the margins of first run syndication to perfect cross-promotional strategies in their attempt to carve a slice out of a television market dominated by network interests. Programs like Star Trek: The Next Generation, Hercules: The Legendary Journeys, and their related spin-offs, Star Trek: Deep Space Nine and Xena: Warrior Princess, worked outside the network system and experimented with branding and world building strategies that would later be adopted in network franchises like Law & Order and CSI. Moreover, the development of these kinds of cross-promotional strategies also owes much to the always-marginal children’s media market, in which partnerships forged across corporate and media boundaries sought to develop greater footholds in mass media markets. Animated programs like GI: Joe and Transformers emerged in the mid-1980s not out of corporate synergy, but a collision of interests in programs based on toys across institutional lines. Restricted in their ability to advertise toward children, toy companies like Hasbro realized that they could use full-length television and comic book narratives as a promotional tool, contracting with Marvel Productions and Marvel Comics, respectively, to produce content for the first run syndication and comic book markets (niche markets in which the recognizable trademark could prove crucial in attracting consumers). Granted, this was still a potentially sinister bit of marketing, but it was not the result of a vertically and/or horizontally integrated conglomerate seeking to multiply its revenue streams. Instead, these franchise strategies emerged from institutional collaboration in which a multiplicity of stakeholders sought to strengthen their various market positions by multiplying production of content from a shared set of intellectual property resources.
In addition to its participation in the franchising of Hasbro’s toy properties, Marvel offers a compelling case study in its own right—and potentially a cautionary tale—with which to examine the advantages of strategic relationships and resource exchange across institutional lines. The history of Marvel presents an example in which a vast, always growing library of exploitable content does not emerge from conglomerate success or support later conglomeration. Marvel’s initial transformation of the X-Men into shared franchise derived from conditions internal to the comic market, while its success (and failures) in extending the property in other media depended in great part upon its ability to exchange production resources with other media companies.

With the comic book market shrinking in the 1980s, and upstart niche imprints offering readers new options, Marvel realized it needed to do something to guarantee revenues. Indeed, the company did look external to comics to find a solution, motivating its diversification and the creation of Marvel Productions in 1981. Marvel reasoned that an animation arm would help it transition its characters into television; but while Marvel Productions helped usher properties like GI Joe on to television, ownership of television interests proved insufficient to ensure its own comic properties would be embraced by television buyers. Marvel actively sought to transition X-Men into television production, but NBC rejected its 1984 proposal (McNeill 1984: 22). Another potential X-Men pilot made it to air in 1989, but this also failed to attract interest. Without a distributional foothold in television, Marvel developed an alternative franchise strategy, however—one confined to the comics industry. Reasoning that the comic market was a zero sum game, the company enacted a calculated strategy to multiply the production of existing books and thus multiply sales. According to market analyst Robert Overstreet, Marvel hoped in 1983 to “‘flood’ the market with Marvel product so the consumer who wanted to keep up with his Marvel collection would have little money left over to spend on other publishers” (1984: A21). As part of this strategy, Marvel’s X-Men title was spun-off into a second ongoing title called New Mutants. By expanding the story of into a second book, Marvel forced readers to choose between the competition and the full X-Men experience. Thus, the emergence of X-Men as a franchise within the comic book industry occurred not as part of a thriving expansion across media, but as a reaction to deteriorating conditions within the single market to which Marvel was largely confined.
Marvel’s ultimate success in transitioning X-Men from comics to filmed entertainment, toys, and video games only came in 1993 at a moment when its desire for diversification meshes with the growth of the Fox television network and its desire to counter-program the Big Three networks via its Fox Kids Network programming block. However, Marvel’s response to the resulting explosion of popularity for X-Men—by 1994, market researchers claimed that the property’s “Q Score” was matched only by Michael Jordan (Miller 1998: 224)—demonstrated the degree to which its successful management of the franchise depended upon risks and capital investment shared across a collaborative network. Figuring that there was no reason it should share its X-Men profits with the production partners, Marvel began to acquire financial control over the companies that produced its trading cards, toys, stickers, and other collectible merchandise (Anderson 1993: 18; Raviv 2002: 41). On one level, this corporate expansion put some of its existing franchise relationships in jeopardy; seeing Marvel not just as the company that made comics for the GI Joe, but now as a competing toymaker, Hasbro executives began to suspect Marvel of sabotaging the GI Joe comics to give X-Men an edge in the toy market. “I want to scare Marvel!” one executive reportedly exclaimed, “I want to kick the shit out of them!” (Miller 1998: 121, 140). At the same time, Marvel over-reached in its corporate expansion. In trying to expand proportionally at a corporate level to the expansion of production based on its trademark resources, Marvel soon found itself holding toxic assets and massive debt from their acquisition at the same time as consumers revolted against an over-saturation of X-Men product. By 1997, Marvel declared bankruptcy.

The return to grace for both Marvel and X-Men came, of course, in a return to franchise relations based on licensing agreements with partner production companies, beginning with the 20th Century Fox X-Men movie in 2000. This does not mean Marvel adopted a hands-off approach; though its film and television arm Marvel Studios did not directly finance or produce the X-Men, Spider-Man, or Fantastic Four films, its primary function until 2004 made it a point of creative and strategic liaison with licensed production partners in other markets. One Marvel studio executive responsible for managing the X-Men video game projects made with Marvel resources by partner Activision described his job as “production-based licensing,” in that he sought to provide direct input and establish ongoing relationships with the companies undertaking these projects in Marvel’s stead. Of course, by 2005, Marvel Studios had secured $525 million in financing to begin producing films like Iron Man and Incredible Hulk in-house, signaling a step away from the licensing model in the film market (even as licensing persists in television and games) (Marr 2005: B1). Moreover, the 2009 purchase of Marvel by the Disney conglomerate suggests that the latter company sees some value in synergistic exploitation of these properties. While time will tell what these developments mean, the history of Marvel demonstrates that there is no direct correlation between successful franchises and conglomeration; instead, franchise success has often depended on exchange between independent media firms.
Franchising Supports Creative Relationships

If media franchising can best be understood in terms of an expansion and multiplication of content production through institutional exchange of intellectual property resources, it follows that the creative process is similarly decentralized as those resources come to be used in practice. At each node in the social network of a media franchise, creative professionals turn those common resources—recognizable characters, narratives, themes, and styles—to the specific ends of the localized conventions, craft practices, and production cultures of the media sector in which they work.

As such, franchising demands that we consider the aesthetics and practices of world building in terms of their shared disposition. In Convergence Culture, Henry Jenkins writes that in the contemporary moment, “storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium” (2006: 114). Beyond the fascinating transmedia potential that Jenkins identifies, the relational logic of franchising calls further attention to the ways in which story worlds have been produced and used beyond any single production culture. Franchises demand that we consider shared worlds and shared world building in terms of the relational dynamics between the creative cultures constructing and using those worlds from a variety of different institutional positions. In shared world building, franchises must be designed by their originators as ongoing systems to support ongoing elaboration from a wider base of co-creators. Such a perspective asks that we consider creativity not just as the development of creative resources, but also as the use of existing resources. By thinking of creators also as users, the design of franchise worlds might be usefully compared to the process of game design, whereby game designers create a system of rules, a context for play, in which players can then act freely in unpredictable ways. As Salen and Zimmerman have argued, the goal of such design is the generation of emergent user behaviors: compelling play dynamics that are unanticipated by the designer but nevertheless materialize from the complex rules and structure of the designed game system set into action (2004: 150). Drawing from this logic, franchise world building can be considered as a process of designing for emergence, of constructing a set of resources that can elaborated upon in structured but unpredictable ways by the social network that shares them.

NBC-Universal’s Battlestar Galactica franchise offers some instructive examples of this design. First and most obviously, the reinvigoration of the property beginning in 2003 stems directly from this potential for reuse of shared creative resources across different production contexts. The series was originally developed for network television in 1978 by producer Glen A. Larson as a story about a space-faring fleet of human refugees (including heroes like Commander Adama, his son Apollo, and hotshot pilot Starbuck) fleeing the annihilation of their home colonies by the evil robotic Cylons. For reuse on the Sci-Fi (now SyFy) cable network, developer Ronald D. Moore reused these specific characters and themes, but tweaked or “reimagined” them. Many of the Cylons now looked like humans, for example, while ladies’ man Starbuck was recast as a woman, and the flashy casino planets of the original series were replaced by a much grittier, claustrophobic sense of confinement to the rickety Colonial ships. But these variations all occurred within use of a core set of basic resources, with the diasporic Colonial fleet still seeking refuge from their robotic pursuers.
In setting up the new Battlestar as a world that could be sustained in serial and franchised production, furthermore, Moore emphasized in his weekly podcasts the importance of what he called “textures.” Referring equally to small moments that hinted at the off-screen lives of supporting characters, to episodes that suggested the unseen economic and political systems through which the Colonial Fleet operated, to elements of production design that established underlying mechanical or cultural complexity within the on-screen world, Moore described as texture any number of things that gave the world depth beyond the surface level seen on the television screen. These textures provide what Jason Mittell has called “drillability” (2009), in that they construct the franchise world as something that can be further elaborated upon at a later date by other writers (whether those on the television series staff, those expanding the story in licensed games or comics, or those crafting fan fiction). An excellent example of these textures comes from the 2010 Battlestar spin-off, Caprica—itself evidence of how the creative resources of the Battlestar world have been used in another, parallel television production context. Caprica elaborates upon the culture of the Taurons (a specific subset of Colonial society suggested to operate outside the bounds of the law according to seemingly throwaway dialogue in Battlestar episodes like “Hero”) by creating the Ha’la’tha crime syndicate and marking related Tauron characters with elaborate tattoos. Executive producer Jane Espenson has detailed the designed significance for each of the tattoos featured on the Sam Adama character, explaining that “[t]he swirl on both shoulders tells us he’s been injured twice in the line of duty,” and that “[t]he strange mark on his forearm tells us he fought in a war” (Wagner 2010). Espenson does not offer the actual details of these incidents, but together with her make-up designers, she has developed a detailed structure for Sam’s backstory that can be freely elaborated upon at a later date. She, or another writer, might use this structure as a point from which to generate more Battlestar/Caprica stories. The potential for later elaboration has been built in to the visual designs for the character—“overdesigned” in the sense that more storytelling potential has been built in than can be immediately used.
The actualization of all this textured potential, however, is highly structured by the social dynamics of the franchise production network. Based on the varying institutional positions and privileges of the numerous creators participating in something like Battlestar, some creators are freer to make certain uses of the franchise resources than others. As a relational, networked form of production, franchise creativity requires the negotiation of power differentials between the different nodes in the network. What results is a tension between what might be termed difference and deference, where those creators with more social and institutional capital in the franchise have the ability to diverge from previous uses, and those will less power use the franchise in more conservative ways so as not to challenge the creative acts of those above them in the creative hierarchy. Only in being given creative authority over a new Battlestar series without having to answer to originator Glen Larsen could Ron Moore dare to reimagine the franchise. With Moore serving as executive producer on Caprica, however, that use of the franchise does not so much reimagine as work within the parameters set out by the 2003 series. However, the presence of Moore and the shared institutional empowerment of the producers of Caprica gives that node of production some freedom to set their own course and carve out new territory by exploring a time period decades prior to the events of Battlestar and setting aside the military themes of its predecessor. Licensees working outside of the privileged production culture of television and contractually bound to seek the approval of licensing departments, on the other hand, cannot afford to pursue such divergent uses. Instead, as Brandon Jerwa, a writer for Dynamite Entertainment’s Battlestar comic books explained in 2007, licensed publishers “don’t just randomly recruit writers for their licensed properties…All of the Galactica project writers are knee-deep in the continuity” (McCarty 2007). Jerwa offered insight into a different production culture within the franchise in which the oversight of brand managers meant that successful use of the property was measured by deference to what had already been written, rather that the ability to forge new paths—continuity with the reimagining, rather than the discontinuity of a reimagining.

Franchising, therefore, demands that we consider the production of media culture in terms of complex and power-laden relationships between producers making use of the shared resources, rather than the singular vision of auteurs or the top-down control of corporate managers. Creators working from various sectors within the media industries, however, are not the only users whose relationship to the shared franchise must be considered.

**Franchising Generates Consumer- Constituent Relationships**

While they might not make the same financial contribution to the coffers of a media franchise as do companies who pay licensee fees to participate in the expanded production of an intellectual property, consumers too might be considered “franchisees” in their roles as stakeholders who have made real investments in ongoing production. Historically, that investment has been affective in nature; while consumers might not have a financial interest in the show, they have emotional interests in the ongoing story and its continued cultural viability. More recently, however, the relationships between media consumers and media content have been reorganized, with audiences invited in to participate in media narratives as well as in the sphere of their production (Johnson 2007).
Much as creators working within the industries have been refigured as users of franchise resources, consumers have entered into the spaces of media fantasy, granted access to manipulate and interact with franchise resources. In the case of massively-multiplayer online games like Star Wars Galaxies and Star Trek Online, consumers can take up roles as characters within those franchises, forming social relationship with others, and notably, taking possession of objects and spaces in those worlds (such as gear, buildings, and pets). Affective investment in the franchise in these cases is enhanced by a sense of ownership over fantasy resources that nevertheless, as Castronova (2005) points out, have real economic value in social exchange.

However, in addition to channeling consumer investment through play, media industries have also reworked consumer activity as labor. As Simone Murray (2004) argues, promotionally-minded marketers have become increasingly amenable to extending to online audiences the right to distribute and create with corporately-owned intellectual property resources in order to promote and drive the circulation of such properties in other markets. Consumers have become accepted promotional partners and producers of ancillary products to sustain the franchise, effectively taking up labor roles within the industry. Viewers of NBC’s The Office, for example, sign up online to role-play as laborers for the Dunder Mifflin Paper company, applying for a position at a local sales branch so that once hired, they can use their computers to perform tasks assigned to them by the management. This playful labor takes on double significance in that being asked in various tasks to collectively design Dunder Mifflin branch logos and to recruit new employees, playful consumers are also building a brand community for NBC. With audiences serving this industrial utility, media corporations have been able to relax their more draconian copyright and trademark enforcement policies in favor of a model more comparable to the extension of franchise rights. In fact, the transformation of consumers into fully-fledged franchisees is in some cases formally constituted by the End-User Licensing Agreements (EULA) that contractually govern the relationship between consumers and the franchise system. In participating in Dunder Mifflin Infinity, consumers grant NBC “a royalty-free, irrevocable, perpetual, non-exclusive, unrestricted license to …use, copy, sublicense, adapt, transmit, publicly perform, display, or create derivative works from any such Communication” generated by their participation (“Terms of Service” 2010). Consumer labor is legally codified as part of the growing franchise.

With consumers embodying a tension between playful fantasy and work of industrial labor, it becomes easier to see that franchise resources have been shared with them as much as between different media institutions and professionalized creators. As franchisees, audiences are constituent stakeholders in the franchise system. In this light, the interests of consumers in media franchises can be considered not just in terms of affect and productivity, but also in terms of politics, in that consumers, like any franchisee, have collective interests in the policies by which shared resources are managed at an institutional level. While by no means truly democratic in nature due, this consumer “enfranchisement” has the potential to bring play, labor, and politics into collision with one another through audience interest in the institutions governing their engagement at each of these levels.
In the case of 24, for example, the extensions of the television series into the realm of print literature and online interactivity have invited audiences to take up a position of institutional oversight at three distinct levels that might be best termed fantasy policy, industry policy, and public policy. In the first case, the series and its franchised extensions relied upon textures that encourage consumers to role-play and thereby develop interests in the institutions that control the story world. Most notable here was the 2002 book The House Special Subcommittee’s Findings at CTU, a work of fictional non-fiction in which author Marc Cerasini, identified as a “reporter,” compiled a collection of testimonies and declassified documents surrounding the first season of the television series. The reader of the book was positioned as someone for whom issues of public oversight over the intelligence community would be a priority. Webpages that detail the voting records and political agendas of characters like President David Palmer similarly privileged the idea of 24 fan as policy wonk. In this case, it was the policy of the fantasy world that came under consumer oversight.

However, it was also the creative policies of the television industry that came under examination through the franchised multiplication of 24 content. Webcasts like 24 Inside as well as DVD special features, for example, encouraged audiences to take an interest in decision-making processes behind the scenes. More uniquely, the 24 “fan phone” began in the 2005 season to offer viewers a direct line to production personnel. That season, the working phone number (310) 597-3781 appeared on screen instead of a traditional “555” stand-in, and within a week’s time, 50,000 fans had called the number, discovering it belonged to a propmaster willing to discuss the series with fans and pass them off to other on-set production personnel (including key producer/director Jon Cassar) (“Cell Phone” 2005). Through this device, fans had a direct channel with which to scrutinize the institutions of production. In that particular season, the series had come under fire from the Council on Arab-Islamic Relations, and the fan phone was used, in concert with collective discussion in the series’ official web forums, to determine to degree to which producers had capitulated to complaints (“Buttergum” 2005). As such, the fan phone offered a means to oversee creative policy at an industry level.

Though perhaps specific to 24, it should also be noted that the franchise mapped its narrative onto real world politics and institutions and generated a third level of consumer investment at the level of public policy. Though protagonist Jack Bauer worked for a fictional government agency, he nonetheless interacted with real institutions such as the Presidency, the FBI, and NSA. The series’ online content even encouraged consumers to make connections between fantasy and public affairs by featuring weekly “Research Files” that promised viewers more background information on the real world agencies, policies, and constitutional amendments featured on the program. This content worked to privilege the notion of 24 having relevance to real world politics—a mode of engagement with the program evinced most baldly by Justice Antonin Scalia’s 2008 deployment of 24 as a case for ends-justifying-the-means security policy: “Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles…He saved hundreds of thousands of lives…Are you going to convict Jack Bauer?” (Lithwick 2008).
Scalia’s example hardly supports consumer enfranchisement as a model of good politics. However, this case nevertheless suggests that consumers invited to invest in media franchises are simultaneously prompted to develop interests in the institutions governing franchise fantasy and those institutions overseeing its production—and sometimes with attention to the institutions of public affairs as well. Understanding consumers as franchisees means understand their constituent relationships to larger institutional structures.

**Franchising Extends Transnational and Transgenerational Relationships**

If media franchising is to sustain the serial production of content from cultural resources shared and invested in from so many different institutional, practitioners, and consumer stakeholder positions, then the phenomenon must lastly be considered in terms of its temporal dimensions. Franchises like Star Wars, Batman, and countless others have supported these kinds of relational investments for decades. In these cases, the exchange of resources across different markets and production cultures has driven their continually renewed relevance—with, for example, Star Wars moving to books, comics, games, and toys in the 1990s interim between films, or Batman’s comic book iterations taking inspiration from new film and television productions (and vice versa). Franchises enjoy a life cycle in which ongoing content production is multiplied, modified, and modulated. Writer-producer Flint Dille, whose credits include work in film, television, and games for properties like Transformers, GI Joe, and Batman, offers a combustible metaphor to make sense of these franchise life cycles. “Think of it as a fire,” he explains. “You want the high notes, the big flames, the fresh logs you’re putting on there...You have to have the coals on the bottom that are drying out the new logs. You have to be creating at the same time as you’re destroying.”
Thinking in terms of the global flows of media culture, however, we can take this logic a further step by asking how the transnational exchange of shared creative and intellectual resources might inject productive difference into these franchises and make significant contributions to their ability to be sustained over time. This means considering the media franchise not as a product distributed in an international marketplace, but as a transnational process of production. Much critical effort has been expended in trying to identify the quintessential “British” or “Japanese” qualities of franchise phenomena like James Bond and Pokémon, respectively (Chapman 2000; Allison 2007), but such arguments occlude the complex ways in which such content has been localized and reshaped in circulation outside of those nations of origin, and how those adaptations are then fed back into the shared resource pool of the franchise. The cultural resources offered by media franchises are not commodities that travel unchanged across multiple distribution markets; instead, the varied use and modification of those resources in different localities means they should be more productively conceptualized as a flexible format for ongoing cultural production. In his study of internationally traded television formats, Albert Moran describes the format as “that set of invariable elements in a program out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced” (1998: 13). Indeed, as a resource to sustain ongoing elaboration and production of content over time, Moran even describes formatting as “a process of licensing or franchising” (1998: x). Moran explains how formats like Wheel of Fortune or Big Brother fail to produce homogeneity of production in international markets, but instead how production is variably tailored to the needs of local producers and audiences. Crucially, the innovations developed by licensed format users are then reintroduced into the format formula, so that the strategies one local production company develops might be shared with the format owners and other format buyers. To return to Dille’s fire metaphor, then, each localized use of franchise resources creates new fuel that can be fed back into an ongoing transnational blaze. The cultural differences afforded by transnational exchange can renew and refresh franchise resources.
The transnational historical transformations of a media franchise like the all-too-fittingly-named Transformers evidence this potential for economic and creative resources to be renewed and refreshed through their localized use in the global marketplace. Identifying a single nation of origin for Transformers is, in fact, an exercise in futility, as the property emerged from a complex stew of patents, trademarks, and marketing schemes combined in partnership by Japanese and American companies. The toys that would become Transformers arguably began in the late 1970s and early 1980s as patents developed by the Japanese toy company Takara for its Microman and Diaclone lines. It was only in collaborating with Hasbro in 1983 to distribute the toys more globally that these various patents acquired any kind of unified cultural meaning as “Transformers.” Takara did have a red and blue robot that transformed into a semi-trailer (marketed as the Diaclone “Convoy”), for example, but it wasn’t until Hasbro tasked the Griffin-Bacal advertising agency (and their partners at Marvel Comics and Marvel Productions) to develop a narrative around that toy that it became Optimus Prime, leader of a group of Autobots engaged in interstellar war with villainous Decepticons. It is not just that Hasbro came up with the Transformers name, but that they developed the narrativized formula with which these toys would be sold globally. From Takara’s patent resources Hasbro developed a new iteration that would be adopted in turn in the Japanese market: as executive Nobuyuki Okude explained, it made little sense for Takara to continue marketing its toys as Diaclone and Microman when it had access to a set of narratives and brand resources with more marketing power (“The Man” 2009).

Though Takara embraced much of the marketing apparatus developed by Hasbro and Griffin-Bacal throughout the mid 1980s—most notably the animated television series—these adoptions of American strategies were partial and selective, not the result of some wholesale control of the global market by an imperialist Hasbro. When Hasbro developed Transformers: The Movie for theatrical distribution in 1986, Takara passed on the chance to use it as a marketing tool in Japan, opting instead to develop its own video tie-in, Scramble City, which highlighted a different set of toys and characters than those pushed by the Hasbro film. Similarly, instead of relying on the Marvel comic books commissioned by Hasbro, Takara developed its own comics drawn and scripted in line with local manga styles and conventions (though not as drastic, British comic book publishers licensed to tell Transformers stories also diverged from the continuity established by Marvel). Moreover, when Hasbro decided to cease production of the animated television series in 1987, Takara elected to continue production on its own local level. Subsequent Transformers series produced by Takara would then use the basic narrative resources of the property to push the franchise in even more divergent directions: Transformers: Super-God Masterforce in 1989, for example, reimagined Optimus Prime as Ginrai, a human truck driver who combines with a “transtector” body to become a Transformers himself.
Takara’s independent, local innovations within the franchise occurred in a moment where Hasbro pulled back from the brand, intending to permanently cease production of its Transformers toys in 1991. The persistent production of Transformers in Japan and in European markets during this slump, however, convinced Hasbro to reinvest in the American iterations of franchise, albeit more moderately, with Transformers toys reentering the market by 1993 (“Interview”). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, furthermore, Hasbro would continue to take a lead from Takara in marketing the property to a niche audience, particularly in relying upon imports of anime series like Transformers: Armada and Transformers: Energon for exhibition on Cartoon Network.

Today, of course, Transformers has reacquired greater popular attention in the U.S., with new local iterations produced in the film, television, comic, and toy markets. Having maintained some kind of market presence in the interim, however, Hasbro has since at least 2003 embraced a “throwback marketing” strategy based in nostalgia, where parents’ continual familiarity and enjoyment of Transformers can be leveraged to construct a new generation of fans out of their children (Paul 2003: 2; Farzad 2005: C7). As the exchange between Hasbro and Takara suggests, the ability of that franchise to persist throughout market ebbs and flows has extended in great part from the renewal of shared resources through heterogeneous use in different cultural contexts. Making Transformers appeal equally to parents as their children means developing a multiplicity of appeals, and the different iterations made possible by the transnational exchange of the property makes that far more possible than if a single, canonical version had been developed. The transgenerational character of this franchise is made more viable by the transnational relationships through which resources are shared, multiplied, reworked, and renewed.

Recommendations

By reflecting on the heterogeneous interests in a shared set of resources implied by the term “franchise,” we gain a much clearer insight into the social, institutional, and creative relationships by which culture has been produced and reproduced in the media industries. To be sure, media franchises are not reducible to the franchise relationships that have structured the retail and service industries over the past sixty to seventy years. Relationships geared toward the expansion of distribution channels and marketing reach function much differently from those aimed at multiplying the production of media culture.

Moreover, the degree to which the cultural logic of franchises (as it has been described in this white paper) is consciously and strategically recognized in the media industries remains to be seen. Many of the executives and creative professionals interviewed for this project disavowed or distanced themselves from the very notion of franchising, claiming ignorance of the term or explaining that such considerations were outside their job description. This likely means that relatively few producers are actually thinking in any real depth about media franchises. While the practices and relationships described here may be in place, a firm structural and strategic logic may not actually underlie them in practice.
Thinking more strategically in terms of franchising—and the cultural logic it implies—has some distinct advantages, and it is here that some initial recommendations can be synthesized:

1. Practitioners should consider franchising in terms of its instructive potential as a historical precedent. Media franchising cannot be solely defined by digital technology or distributed peer-to-peer networking. However, in the current rush to develop the new frontiers of transmedia, user-generated content, and social media, the media franchise offers an imperfect model that newer forms of social media can continue to draw from and improve. The media franchise offers proven strategies for generating consumer and creator investment in collaborative projects. The history of franchising is replete with examples of how the media industries have already tried to organize collaboration and co-creation through a system of social relationships. Historical insights into the history of media franchising reveal the challenges of sharing collective resources and suggest how similar contemporary challenges might be more effectively managed.

2. The relational logic of media franchising challenges industry insiders to reconsider any strategic logics structured around singular control over the use of intellectual properties. Companies such as Marvel Comics that sought to impose alignment through corporate expansion suffered for it. They later rediscovered the advantages of surrendering control, in that risk and investment could be distributed across these negotiated institutional relationships. The recommendation here echoes the same ones made by marketing experts like David Schwartz and Harry Kursh at the genesis of retail franchising in the 1950s and 1960s. Because the franchise brings into relationship stakeholders with a wide range of unequal interests in cultural properties, it seems overly-optimistic to hope that each node in the social network will operate in a uniform, evenly distributed way.

3. In contrast to prohibitive top-down controls, open and heterogeneous creative experimentation can be relied upon to renew and regenerate existing intellectual property production resources. The televisual reimagining of Battlestar Galactica and the transnational exchange of Transformers exemplify the potential of a more open, promiscuous approach to long term experimentation. These franchises succeeded by encouraging diverse stakeholders to inject difference and innovation into resources of production in as varied a manner as possible. Such success hinted at a return to older notions of franchising (franchir) in which “enfranchisement” suggested the ability to act freely. At the moment, however, there remains much room for this free creative agency to be implemented. Even in the case of Battlestar’s television revival, strict controls and hierarchies hindered licensed creators’ ability outside of television to likewise enrich the long-term value of the franchise. Similarly, Hollywood has also experimented with new managerial positions to bring unity to franchise production (such as the Transmedia Producer credit recently codified by the Producers Guild) (Finke 2010). Centralized management and control strategies can produce a single, authoritative narrative “canon,” but they must be balanced with more open and multiplicative strategies to sustain long-term franchise renewal.
4. In developing collaborative productive models, industry professionals should develop greater appreciation of contributions that emerge from outside the top echelons of power. By thinking of licensed creators and fans alike as “franchisees,” license holders can recognize vital stakeholders in the ongoing production of media properties. While these stakeholders have no ownership claim, they make valuable economic and affective investments nonetheless. Understanding the perspectives and labor of these contributors would aid the media industries in accommodating a more egalitarian culture while also developing more efficient models of co-creation and collaboration. Though such commercial “enfranchisement” may remain of debatable value to traditional politics, it does acknowledge users’ and consumers’ claims to agency in the production of shared culture. From that position of recognition, franchise managers may more equitably account for the function of consumers within the media industries (perhaps challenging the notion of “consumption” altogether). Ultimately, the cultural logic of franchising asks us to respect a wide variety of claims to cultural creation and ownership by acknowledging localized investments and contributions.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Some significant obstacles do limit the applicability of these ideas to industry practice. Put most simply: the notion of franchise comes with baggage.

Given the existing, economically over-determined articulations between the franchising model and devalued cultural institutions like McDonald’s, for example, it is probable that the media franchise will continue to be perceived in opposition to notions of “quality.” As a result, practitioners and scholars both will continue to disavow any association with or knowledge of media franchising, choosing to make sense of their work in other, culturally advantaged ways. Similarly, because franchising is not a new concept (but an older one with meanings already firmly attached) it may be difficult to convince either industry analysts or scholars to think about it in any greater depth.

Nevertheless, understanding the media franchise on its own terms uncovers an industrial model that has historically organized and made sense of a wide, heterogeneous network of ongoing, decentralized content production. As this study has argued, the cultural logic of franchising is relational, supporting social negotiation of shared resources across the following vectors:

1. Media institutions
2. Creative practices
3. Consumer investment
4. Transnational exchange

While these dimensions have been sketched out here, each warrants further examination.
Finally, though some executives like Robert Iger clearly do think in terms of franchising, framing its cultural logic in terms of “value” to the industry, we should also consider the value of this model beyond the commercial sphere. If franchising can be considered a model of social organization through which the ongoing production of culture is negotiated, then the propagation of objects, stories, and ideas through this social system have been fueled by creative and cultural desires to share in their value. The most important questions about the media franchise, therefore, ask to whom they have value, what kinds of value, how that value is generated, and why. These questions can be answered in economic terms, but to fully answer them, this project has demonstrated that we need to look to social and cultural values as well.
Works Cited


