



Saturday Morning Cartoons Go MMOG

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Abstract

This paper traces the migration of North American children's television into the realm of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), and the issues this raises in terms of the commercialisation of children's (digital) play. Through a content analysis of three television-themed MMOGs targeted to children, Nickelodeon's *Nicktropolis*, Cartoon Network's *Big Fat Awesome House Party*, and Corus Entertainment's *GalaXseeds*, I examine how this new development within children's online culture operates in relation to existing industry practices of cross-media integration and promotion. Dominant trends identified in the content analysis are compared with emerging conventions within the MMOGs genre, which is generally found to contain numerous opportunities for player creativity and collaboration. Within the cases examined, however, many of these opportunities have been omitted and ultimately replaced by promotional features. I conclude that all three case studies operate primarily as large-scale advergames, promoting transmedia intertextuality and third-party advertiser interests.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, children's television has established itself at the nexus of cross-media integration. While adaptations and industry partnerships have long been a staple of children's media culture, the merger of the toy and television industries in the early-1980s, as exemplified by the introduction of highly successful toy-based Saturday morning cartoons, inspired a growing array of cross-promotional activities. Today's most profitable and highest-rated children's programs frequently adopt multi-media strategies that expand across media forms and consumer products. Television characters and themes are transported into film, print, and the digital realm—each of which works to cross-promote the others, and all of which promote tie-in toys and related merchandise (Kinder, 1991; Kline, 1993; McAllister and Giglio, 2005). These licensed products allow children to play with TV characters, wear their images, and use quotidian objects that bare their imprint.

As Meehan (1991) argues, licensing potential is now so important that it often dictates which properties are selected for production. From an industry perspective, cross-media strategies make sense because the risks and initial costs of launching a new brand can be spread out across a number of sectors. Furthermore, cross-media synergy has proven quite popular among children themselves. Studies of children's media and toy preferences have shown a predilection for properties that employ cross-promotional strategies, which appears to increase with exposure (Fisher, 1985; Seiter, 1993; Kline, 1993; Otnes et al., 1994). An example can be found in the steady rise of television tie-in toys. By the mid-1980s, television character licensing made up 40-50% of all toy sales (Pecora, 1998), a market share that continued into the late 1990s (Kapur, 1999). In 2003, Rideout et al. (2003: 4) found that nearly all American children (97%) under the age of six years owned toys and other products 'based on characters from TV shows or movies.'

In recent years, the children's networks have established themselves at the vanguard of children's digital culture, creating websites in the late 1990s that continue to rank among kids' top-rated (and most frequented) online destinations ('Top Kid-Entertainment Sites,' 2001; Loechner, 2005; McAllister and Giglio, 2005). While these sites feature a variety of activities, including discussion forums, mini-games, and 'webisodes,' they ultimately serve as promotional vehicles for the television network and its programs. They also provide data for market research and new project development ('Interactive Kids, Ages' 1999; 'Interactive Kids: Contests,' 1999; Tracy, 2001). For example, digital media have become an important means of showcasing prospective new series and product lines, which can be tested out with child audiences online before being incorporated into television broadcast schedules (Shields, 2006).

More than any other medium, digital games have provided the children's television industry with a means of merging programming and advertising into a completely unified experience. Here, the children's television industry provides players with the opportunity to engage with digital versions of the characters and themes from their favourite television shows. Digital games are also used for cross-promotion in the form of sponsored advergames, which are little more than interactive advertisements. The Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon both run websites that consistently rank among kids' top online destinations for playing games (Loechner, 2005). This is significant because such a large proportion of children (aged 12 years and under) play games online. While the statistics and age ranges differ from one study to the next, Greenspan (2003) reports that among children aged 7 to 12 years, as many as 87% play games on the internet. Recently, the children's television industry's interest in digital games has expanded to include an emerging form of gaming that is already quite successful among teens and adults ('Cartoon Network to Develop,' 2006; 'Take Note,' 2007; Calder, 2007)—the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG).

This paper traces the migration of North American children's television into the realm of MMOGs, and the issues this raises in terms of the commercialisation of children's (online) play. Drawing on a content analysis of three television-themed MMOGs targeted to children, the discussion examines how this new development within children's culture expands upon previous forms of cross-media integration and promotion. The theoretical framework for this study draws upon previous research into cross-media integration within children culture and the notion of transmedia intertextuality. Rather than focus on a single text, Kapur (1999: 127) argues, children's media should be approached as whole collections of objects and activities, as 'media brands' that only construct their full meaning when positioned (i.e. owned) together. Thus, media brands or 'supersystems,' create a form of 'transmedia intertextuality,' which Kinder (1992: 35) describes as, 'a means of structuring characters, genres, voices and visual conventions into paradigms, and models for interpreting and generating new combinations.'

For most children's media brands, the resulting organizing system is one that privileges and extends consumerism (Meehan, 1991). Each text promotes consumption of the other (related) texts, and invokes consumerism as the preferred mode of experience—by promising that purchase of ancillary products will enable more intimate access to the narrative and its characters. In the context of digital media, Kline et al. (2003) propose a 'three-circuits model' that not only addresses the interaction between culture and marketing, but also considers the growing role of technology. For example, Kline et al. (2003: 21) argue, the same promotional practices that have come to shape children's television are not only working their way 'into game content' but also into the very programming of game software. The three-circuits model is particularly useful for understanding how broader trends within the children's industries come to shape technological design decisions and digital content.

Although this study stems from a Canadian context, and therefore includes a Canadian case study, emphasis is placed on US-based projects and American business practices, which are clearly shaping the early stages of child-targeted MMOG development. While none of the examples are specific to the Australian context, the cases reviewed herein are nonetheless relevant in terms of their prominence within the transnational children's digital culture. The Canadian case is owned and operated by Corus Entertainment, one of the world's leading producers of children's television programming. The companies behind the two American cases, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, are both major contributors to the global children's culture. Considering the profound influence of North American media industries in the production and distribution of transnational culture, the continued popularity of American media products among child audiences worldwide, as well as the leading role of the US in the commercialisation of digital culture, developments in this area are likely to have far reaching implications.

Kids' TV Goes MMOG

Over the past year, the Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, and Corus Entertainment have all launched MMOGs that can be accessed for free through the companies' child-targeted websites. Many more such projects are currently in development, including another multiplayer game by the Cartoon Network (*Fusion Fall*) ('Cartoon Network's Massively,' 2007), and a collaboration between CBS and DIC Entertainment called *Kewlopolis* ('DIC To Rebrand,' 2007). Public broadcasters in the US (PBS) and the UK (BBC) have also announced plans to launch child-oriented MMOGs in the coming months, with content geared toward educational programming and activities. This spurt of interest in MMOGs reflects a larger trend within the children's industries to capitalise on a contemporary phenomenon that integrates community-building tools with persistent gaming. For example, the toy industry is

actively expanding to MMOGs and social-networking sites, as seen in Mattel's *BarbieGirls*, Ganz's *Webkinz*, and the upcoming *LEGO Universe*.

MMOGs consist of large three-dimensional games that allow multiple players (up to thousands at a time) to play together simultaneously. They commonly feature persistent worlds, which occur in real time and feature ongoing story arcs that continue to evolve whether or not players are present. Some include contained plot developments are introduced in the form of missions or quests. A number of MMOGs, including *World of Warcraft*, *Lineage* and *Sims Online*, have become quite popular among teens and adults in recent years, attracting a large amount of press coverage and academic inquiry. Despite children's propensity for online gaming, however, very few MMOGs allow players under the age of thirteen. Many MMOGs carry a 'T' (for Teen) rating from the US-based Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), which means they have been deemed unsuitable for pre-teenaged children. In addition, in the US, sites frequented by children aged twelve and under are subject to special privacy regulations, outlined in the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which might discourage developers from creating games for a younger age group. The notable exception since 2003 has been Disney's *Toontown*, which until now was one of the only MMOGs to allow and actively target children under the age of thirteen.

MMOGs are viewed as promoting a fairly unique and innovative form of gaming, characterised by an emphasis on multiplayer communication, collaboration, and open-ended game environments (Taylor, 2006). Studies have uncovered significant instances of cultural participation among MMOG players, including player-driven (unsanctioned) virtual economies (Castronova, 2005), the co-authoring of complex storylines (Taylor, 2006), and player-modified game code (Postigo, 2003). Recently, players have begun using MMOGs to create short films called 'machinima,' transforming game environments into virtual film sets and avatars into actors. The dual focus on community and creativity found within MMOG environments has led some game theorists to argue that they are more than 'just a game,' but also important social spaces (Castronova, 2005; Taylor, 2006). These qualities distinguish MMOGs from other transmedia intertexts. Traditionally, audiences—and especially children—have not had regular access to media production technologies, nor the means to participate directly in the creation of mass media content. The US media industries have also been incredibly vigilant in enforcing strict copyright regimes, launching high-profile lawsuits aimed at prohibiting individuals from engaging creatively with copyrighted characters and texts. Furthermore, although a number of media properties have attracted (and to varying degrees accommodated) fan community appropriations, the majority of the time these activities have little impact on the contents of the texts themselves.

In contrast, even licensed MMOGs generally provide players with opportunities for cultural participation. While some transmedia intertextuality is present within the game's overarching themes and environments (which are derived from the ancillary text), players contribute to the shared gameplay experience by creating a significant portion of the characters, interactions, events, and items that make up the MMOG experience. In these cases, the ancillary text provides the meta-narrative, but does not require players to re-enact movie plotlines or interact directly with recognisable characters. For example, *Lord of the Rings Online*, a T-rated MMOG released in April 2007, allows players to enter into the world of Middle Earth as an individually-customised member of one of the four 'races' depicted in the texts (human, elf, dwarf or hobbit), and complete quests consistent with the reality of the texts (such as killing monsters or playing a lute) without directly reproducing them. This approach diverges from other forms of licensed videogames, which in the past have mostly consisted of adaptations or supplements (providing background information, for example) to the ancillary text, with little room for deviation or customisation.

Were this approach carried over to children's MMOGs, it would represent quite a departure from previous forms of cross-media integration within the children's television industry, which traditionally emphasises homogeneity across media. On the other hand, the move toward MMOGs can also be seen as an extension of the industry's already complex relationship with toys and play. More than a marriage of convenience, the merger between children's toys and media introduced a whole new dimension to transmedia intertextuality, that of 'playing television.' Although the extent of this relationship is still under debate, studies into licensed toy play indicate that children's familiarity with the associated text has a limiting influence on the contents of their play (Kline, 1993; Gotz et al., 2004). Licensed toys come with a lot of 'narrative baggage' (Fleming, 1996)—character traits and storylines, the 'play scripts' featured in toy ads, and the diminished affordances of highly-specialised toy designs. Some scholars are optimistic, however, that because children's play is often characterised by appropriation and subversion, licensed toys could become tools for engaging with media texts and challenging dominant ideologies, instead of merely reproducing them (Seiter, 1993). Research suggests that the presence of peers increases the likelihood that subversive play will take place (Sutton-Smith, 1986; Gussin Paley, 2004). Since so much toy play occurs alone and within the private domain of the children's 'bedroom culture,' the opportunities for peer interaction provided by MMOGs could thus serve an important function.

However, MMOGs also raise a number of ethical issues that may not find resolution within a promotional context. The large volume of inter-player communication commonly associated with MMOGs could make moderation a difficult and timely process. Moderation is a particularly crucial consideration for projects involving children, not only because of COPPA, but also as a result of mounting parental concerns about online predators, cyber-bullying and privacy. Furthermore, player creativity can easily come into conflict with corporate interests, as has been the case within T-rated MMOGs, resulting in accusations of censorship and intellectual property disputes (Lastowka & Hunter, 2004). While in-game activities are regulated to some extent by the game's design and terms of use, the open-endedness of MMOGs has required the game industry to enter into an ongoing negotiation with its players. The key here has been in striking a balance between protecting corporate interests while allowing for the spontaneity of collaborative play. If a similar dialog is to develop with child players, children's special status as a group with diminished political and legal rights will have to be addressed, as will the needs of parents.

Mapping the Emerging Kids' MMOG Terrain

While the integration of MMOGs into the children's media supersystem is still in the preliminary stages, the small sample launched over the past year provides a timely snapshot of an unfolding phenomenon. Using a case study approach, three MMOGs were selected for analysis. The sample included Nickelodeon's *Nicktropolis*, Cartoon Network's *Big Fat Awesome House Party* and Corus Entertainment's *GalaXseeds*. All three cases were analyzed over a three-month period, between March and June 2007, using a combination of participant observation and qualitative content analysis (of both primary and secondary sources). Emerging trends were further identified through comparative analysis. In a first instance, the case studies were compared to other MMOGs, in terms of emerging genre conventions such as player communication and collaboration, persistent worlds, ongoing storylines, sprawling game environments, and open-endedness. The second point of comparison was the children's television industry's own set of established conventions relating to advertising practices (including advergames).

Data collection focused on game structure (rules, goals, etc.) and design elements (aesthetic and technological), and on mapping the contents of the games

themselves (recording the presence of ads, identifying possible in-game activities, etc.). The research goal was to uncover emerging patterns in the children’s television industry’s incorporation of MMOGs, in relation to existing cross-promotional practices. While child players were present (in-game) during participant observation for two cases, their activities were not recorded and interaction with them was kept to a minimum. Although player data would have allowed a better understanding of the player experience, all three MMOGs had built-in constraints on inter-player communication that would have prevented researcher self-identification and in-game requests for research participants. These conditions would have made informed consent (of both children and their parents) almost impossible to obtain. Player observation and interviews were thus postponed to a later stage in the research, and will be limited to players with whom informed consent and parental permission have been secured.

The first part of the analysis consisted of an overview of secondary data, including news articles, press releases and industry coverage. This provided background information for each site, details of ownership, launch dates, usage statistics and partnership announcements (see Table 1 for details). Participant observation was conducted within each site, through which the themes, activities, and features of gameplay were mapped and recorded. The sites were categorised as ‘original’ if the meta-narrative and dominant themes were not based on a previously existing license, and ‘licensed’ if they were. The contents were further categorised based on the predominant form of promotional activity found within each site, from branded areas (areas of the game environment thematically based on a licensed property or brand), to advergames (self-contained mini-games that advertise a specific brand or product), and in-game ads (banner ads and non-interactive advertisements). Finally, a content analysis was conducted, using an open-ended, qualitative protocol.

Table 1: Case study ownership, launch, population and content information

<i>Name</i>	<i>Corporate Ownership</i>	<i>Launch Date</i>	<i>Population Size</i>	<i>Content</i>
Nicktropolis	Nickelodeon	January, 2007	4 million	Original, with branded areas and features
GalaXseeds	Corus Entertainment	February, 2007	Unavailable	Original, with advergames
Foster’s Big Fat Awesome House Party	Cartoon Network	May, 2006	13 million	Licensed, with in-game ads

The dominant theme across all three cases is the prevalence of promotional content. Unlike the vast majority of T-rated MMOGs, which require initial purchase and payment of monthly subscription fees, these games are offered free of charge and supported by advertising revenue. Ads are featured throughout all three games, as clickable banner ads, as video-clips that run while the games are loading, and as images integrated directly into the game environments. Within *Nicktropolis*, several areas feature screens that play trailers and webisodes of Nickelodeon television programs. In addition, the game includes a number of branded areas where players can interact inside theme-rooms or ‘purchase’ (using in-game currency) items based on Nickelodeon cartoons. In many cases, gameplay and promotional features are seamlessly integrated, making it difficult to distinguish content from advertising. Another form of integrated promotional content is found in *GalaXseeds*, where players are invited to participate in a game of “Hive n’ Seek,” sponsored by Honeycombs cereal, and encouraged to travel to *Skittilization* (sponsored by

Skittles). In *Big Fat Awesome House Party*, ads for children's films periodically appear as movie posters scattered around the house and grounds. While in-game ads are becoming an important source of revenue within T-rated MMOGs as well, their ubiquity within children's games is worthy of note. Furthermore, many of the ads feature products that are also heavily promoted on children's television. This includes brands produced by companies that have recently committed to stop advertising unhealthy foods to children (such as sugar cereals), a self-imposed ban that may or may not extend to MMOGs.

The emphasis in *Big Fat Awesome House Party* is on providing an online companion site for a Cartoon Network television series called *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*. As the only licensed game in the sample, it represents the most explicit example of transmedia intertextuality—enabling expansion of the program's characters and storyline, while referring the player back to the show in order to experience the 'whole story.' Periodically, 'special codes' required for accessing rare in-game items are revealed during television broadcasts of *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, while others are included on the series DVD. Similar to licensed toys, the game allows children to interact with the ancillary text and incorporate it into their play. The player enters into the narrative as the newest inhabitant of *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, exploring the many rooms of the house and other locations featured in the series. Player progress is rewarded with opportunities to complete 'missions' with the show's main character, Bloo. However, while these missions provide players with the chance to interact more directly with the show's characters, the player's role is limited to that of tag-along in what is essentially a reproduction of a previously aired episode of the television series.

All three games diverge from previous MMOGs in that they allow players only limited opportunities for participation and collaboration. This is particularly the case with features geared toward cross-promotion. For example, *Nicktropolis* contains numerous branded areas, each based on a particular Nickelodeon property. However, there is very little for players to do once they get there other than watch video-clips, dress their avatar like the show's characters, 'purchase' branded virtual items, and chat with other players. There is no way for the player to enter into the narrative other than at a purely aesthetic level. While *Big Fat Awesome House Party* allows players to engage more directly with its associated themes and characters, the closer players get to the main characters and storylines, the more restricted their actions become. In *GalaXseeds*, the overarching narrative is removed from the daily gameplay experience—players must read news bulletins to keep up with the evolving storyline, and have little observable impact on how it unfolds.

In response to continued public concern, as well as COPPA requirements, all three case studies put a heavy emphasis on child safety. Each MMOG includes a number of 'safety features' that place significant restrictions on inter-player communication. The most extreme case is *Big Fat Awesome House Party*, where player interaction has been removed altogether. Here, players cannot even see each other as they roam around the game, leading the Cartoon Network to promote the site to parents as the first 'massively single-player online game.' In both *Nicktropolis* and *GalaXseeds*, in-game communication is limited to a sort of bricolage, where players must select sentences from scroll-down menus of predetermined chat options. While *Nicktropolis* does allow for a more involved form of 'dictionary chat' with parental permission, the more commonly-used scroll-down system is limited to 634 pre-constructed sentences, 237 of which contain explicit references to a Nickelodeon property (including TV programs, films and branded areas of *Nicktropolis*). Through the inclusion of just a small number of customisable sentences, *GalaXseeds* is able to provide players with nearly 8,200 chat options—although a large proportion of these refer to a fairly limited pool of topics, dealing with in-game items and areas. Corus has made no direct linkage between *GalaXseeds* and its existing media properties, and this is also reflected in the chat options.

Nonetheless, players do have a choice of 17 chat phrases that refer to the site's advergames. In both cases, the vast majority of sentences containing brand references are positive in tone.

The politics of how and what is included in the sites' chat options is an issue worthy of a paper all of its own. It is clear, however, that within the context of MMOGs such limited player interaction diminishes (and perhaps even eliminates) opportunities for multiplayer collaboration and community-building. The rationale for restricting communication to this extent, as opposed to adopting the more common practice of strict moderation and monitoring of player interactions, remains to be determined. Although moderation is arguably more costly and complicated to some extent by COPPA, online communities such as *Club Penguin* and *BarbieGirls.com* have thus far been quite successful in using moderation to protect child users (e.g. dictionary chat and live monitoring). That the decision is framed as a 'safety feature' is important, in that it demonstrates an incorporation of parental concerns and children's needs within the game design. However, it is also consistent with the overarching pattern within these sites to remove opportunities for player interaction and replace them with cross-promotional discourse. The danger is that without proper regulation or established industry standards, a corporately determined rhetoric of 'child safety' will be used as a Trojan horse for enhanced commercialisation of children's digital play spaces.

Conclusion

In the current era of cross-media convergence and industry consolidation, children's television is able to generate more than simple catalogues of spin-off products and cross-media adaptations, and much more than the sum of its individual texts. Through transmedia intertextuality, media brands are also able to construct entire cultural experiences based around beloved characters, fantasy and play. However, media brands also promote the notion that entry into these worlds is only possible through a perpetual cycle of consumption. With the introduction of MMOGs, the industry has seen an opportunity to extend cross-promotional intertextuality to yet another facet of children's cultural experience. Cornering the kids' MMOG market could mean securing access to the increasingly significant amount of time that children spend playing games online. How this access will be used, however, raises a number of ethical and regulatory questions that have yet to be addressed.

As preliminary case studies, the games analyzed herein do not supply sufficient data to establish generalisable patterns. The games themselves are quite divergent, in terms of contents and gameplay, and are likely to attract different player communities. Of the three cases reviewed, *GalaXseeds* is by far the most open-ended, offering an exponentially wider scope of communicative options, opportunities for community ('Take Note,' 2007), and a more limited emphasis on cross-promotion. Conversely, the other two cases examined have little in common with other MMOGs, and represent a significant departure from established conventions. *Nicktropolis* operates more like a social-networking site than a MMOG, and is by far the most heavily commercialised. While *Big Fat Awesome House Party* incorporates some of the qualities of MMOGs (e.g., a persistent game world), its exclusion of multi-player interaction in the name of 'child safety' could set a troubling precedent. Despite their differences, all three games appear to operate primarily as large-scale advergames, promoting transmedia intertextuality and third-party advertisers. While in their traditional form, MMOGs contain a great amount of space for player creativity and collaboration, in each of the cases examined, many such opportunities had been omitted and ultimately replaced by promotional features.

Positioned at the forefront of digital media convergence, the children's television industry is undergoing yet another massive transformation. As one executive at DIC Entertainment said recently, 'We see the TV show almost as an

infomercial for the online' (cited in Raugust, 2007). This statement is particularly disconcerting given the highly promotional nature of the children's industries existing websites and MMOGs, as well as the highly unregulated state of digital media. The integration of new media forms, like MMOGs, could have a liberating effect on children's 'bedroom culture,' by opening new (virtual) opportunities for peer play, and providing children with the tools to critically engage with media brands. On the other hand, the homogenizing effects of transmedia intertextuality and its emphasis on consumerism could also result in a reframing of 'participatory culture' to better accommodate longstanding commercial priorities. Just as the merger of toys and television significantly reshaped children's culture in the 1980s, the contemporary convergence of traditional and digital media is sure to have a lasting impact. In both cases, the most important question is not how it affects profit margins or the quality of media content, but rather how it impacts upon children's play. The next step for research in this area is thus to consider the player experience, and discover the role of the player within processes of transmedia intertextuality and the three circuit model of marketing, technology, and culture.

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