ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the historical relationship between the branded media entertainment of Tarzan and the rise of consumer culture in the 1920s and 1930s. It argues that the transmedia licensing of this property across pulp magazines, comics, and radio reflected the growing embrace of brand-franchise logics throughout the business landscape of America at that time. I offer the metaphor of ‘stepping stones’ to understand the brand linkages between these different media products in which consumption of one product led to the consumption of another. More importantly, I analyse the function of Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs and his company, suggesting that his visibility as franchise-author played a crucial role in constructing these brand linkages between media products. Contextualised as part of the very different cultural landscape of 1920s and 1930s consumer culture, I demonstrate how an authorial name operated commercially as much as a corporatised component of the branded entertainment products of Tarzan as the Tarzan character himself.

INTRODUCTION

By 1975, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc., a family-owned corporation founded in March 1923, was reported to be earning in the region of $1 million annually from the sales of texts and products based on the fictional character Tarzan. ‘The world-wide gross of Tarzan products sold under license to us is at least $50 million a year,’ asserted Robert M. Hodes, the man in charge of the Tarzan empire at that time (The New York Times, 1975, p. 59). ‘Besides the income from Tarzan motion pictures,’ Hodes continued, ‘there are royalties from two million Burroughs books published annually and comic strips in 250 newspapers. Also, manufacturers pay royalties on Tarzan products’ (ibid.). American author Edgar Rice Burroughs, once branded ‘the modern Jules Verne’ (The Washington Post, 1934, p. 2), had indeed transformed the

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fictional tales of his imagination into a business empire. ‘Next to Coca-Cola,’ Burroughs’ grandson Danton once claimed, ‘Tarzan is the best known name in the world’ (The New York Times, 1975, p. 59).

It is altogether significant that Tarzan should be paired with Coca-Cola in this instance, for to discuss Tarzan in this context of both textual creation and corporate brand is to discuss it not exclusively as a character, or as a series of texts, or even as a fictional world, but also as a distribution of trademark that spreads under the ownership of a corporation. This chapter explores the historical relationship between the branded media entertainment of Tarzan and the rise of consumer culture in the 1920s and 1930s. It argues that the successful licensing of this property across pulp magazines, comics, cinema, and radio reflected the embrace of brand-franchise logics throughout the business landscape of America at that time. I will document the industrial structures in place and those which evolved accordingly to enable Tarzan to be manufactured corporately and sold as narratively transmedial components of an historical branded media franchise. I offer the metaphor of ‘stepping stones’ to understand the brand linkages between these different media products in which consumption of one product led to the consumption of another. The chapter analyses the function of Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs and his company, suggesting that his visibility as franchise-author played a crucial role in constructing these brand linkages between media products. Contextualised as part of the very different cultural landscape of 1920s and 1930s consumer culture, then, I will demonstrate how an authorial name operated commercially as much as a corporatised component of the branded entertainment products of Tarzan as the Tarzan character himself.

BACKGROUND

Despite the historicised focus of this chapter, considering the role of branding in – and as part of – entertainment might typically lead us to a fairly small amount of academic literature produced during the last decade. Such work encompasses perspectives on marketing, promotion, media production, franchising, transmedia, and indeed branding itself. The very notion of entertainment as branding is embodied in Henry Jenkins’ conception of transmedia, for instance. Consider the media texts emerging from The Matrix film (1999), which Jenkins selects as the exemplar to define transmedia storytelling. This example consists of three films, a collection of shorts called The Animatrix, a comic book series, and a videogame titled Enter the Matrix, all of which contained storyline elements that interwove across the different media texts. In ‘Final Flight of the Osiris,’ one of The Animatrix shorts, for instance, a protagonist called Jue sacrifices herself in order to send a message to the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar, an event that is referred to in The Matrix Reloaded (2003). In that film, Morpheus and Trinity are rescued by Niobe in the middle of a high-speed freeway chase – a daring rescue that players of the videogame had encountered as a specific mission (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 104-106). As Jenkins elaborates here:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. … In The Matrix franchise, key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the Matrix universe (2007).