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Discourse swings in understanding audiences: Case studies on Hollywood's cooptation of audience activity(s) as emergent discourse

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ABSTRACT

Traditional discourses of the relationship between media producers and consumers have been challenged as of late in post-industrialized countries. The blurring of established consumer/producer identities due to changes in the mediascape, forecasted for decades, has changed how both academics and media professionals characterize the role of people in media engagements. The initial conceptualization of "audience-as-commodity" was challenged by increased recognition of the audience as active consumers, or "audience-as-agent". Recently this recognition has led to the Hollywood media industry's cooptation of these consumers, conceptualizing the people who engage with their media products as a combination of the previous two, or "audience-as-pusher". This paper is an account of this discourse swing through the description of case studies that demonstrate the utilization of interactive marketing schemes to co-opt pre-existent and emergent audience activity(s). The emergent conceptualization and its relationship with previous ones present academics with challenges and opportunities for theorizing and studying the relationships between the media industry and the people in their everyday lives.

Audiences-as-Discourses

Martin Allor defined the nature of the media audience as a discourse two decades ago: “The audience exists nowhere; it inhabits no real space, only positions within analytic discourse” (1988, p. 228)¹. In his analysis of various academic approaches to understanding the site of media impacts as the convergence of individual and social practices, he demonstrated that what has always been “the audience” in media studies is actually a heterogenous range of multiple subject positions and structural positionings. An audience is an abstraction, a socially constructed reality, constituted of and constructed by academic definings of what people do with the media and what the media does to people (Fiske, 1988; Hartley, 1988; Webster, 1998); in other words, an audience is the crystallization of people being active in their engaging with media products, as well as the variety of actions that surround this engaging, including the actions of the media professionals and scholars. The term audience activity(s) is applied in this paper to focus on how active and what the actions are of the people engaging with the media products; it is the scrutiny of this audience activity(s) that determines how we understand what an audience is.

From this perspective, what an audience is at any given juncture of time and space depends upon how it is viewed by those who look at it – resulting in a Schrödinger’s cat of theoretical and methodological problematics. Academics define the audiences from their epistemological and methodological perspectives on people. The type of research conducted, as explained by theories and metatheories, label people based on epistemological beliefs for how and why they engage with media products, for example: gendered, decentered, casual, consumerist, passive, mass, fanatic, spectator, prosumer (Allor, 1988; Meehan, 2007; Webster, 1998). Thus, how an audience is to be understood cannot be understood without deconstructing and understanding those seeking to understand.

However, we need to remember the materiality of the people who in their daily lives engage with physical media products (Fiske, 1988; Lull, 1988; Webster, 1998). In seeking to understand the power issues at play in defining the audience, we must not focus solely on the top-down definings of academics, but also the bottom-up experiencings of real people in situations of engaging with media products. Additionally, there are the very material structures of the media industry responsible for a majority of the media products in circulation, and the actions it takes to encourage and discourage these engagings. For purposes of this essay, any discussion of the media industry is referring to the system established by the Hollywood capitalist structure, which is focused on advertising revenue and for-profit media production and

distribution of motion pictures and television series². The cases being discussed in this paper all come from Hollywood media conglomerates with international presences.

To understand audiences-as-discourses, we need to recognize the intersection of a socially constructed interpretation of reality as built upon and influencing the material conditions of the people and the media industry (Hartley, 1988). Who is the audience is crystallized only in that agreed upon reaction to and construction of an engaging with a media product. It is not simply the agreed upon definings of academics; the process of agreeing, from critically resisting to obligingly abiding, includes the media industry in creating the media products and the people in receiving them.

The understanding of what an audience is at any given moment in time depends on the confluence of these variables, and the ways in which they behave towards and discuss one another. To see audiences-as-discourses this way is to understand discourse in the broadest term of social constructivism, as the material and the interpretive co-construct each other (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), and where the discourse lies not in the product but the process. An audience then is not simply a representation of some physical entity, but rather a conceptualization of the relationships between those who produce media products, those who engage with them, and those who study the others. An audience-as-discourse is an attempt to understand the power dynamics in these relationships, and how the location of power influences the actions and interpretations of the others. Seeing audiences-as-discourses allows for understanding that what are normalized are conceptions of the relationships. Because the discourse focuses on the relationships, it is mutable, reflexive to material conditions and ideological swings.

At any point in these interactions, resistance to the “normal” can produce change, which can then be taken up by the people, the academics and/or the media industry to produce a swing in the discourse -- that is, to produce a new way of conceptualizing, theorizing and explaining the relationships. Because there are different labels, different epistemologies, and different practices at play during any given space/time moment, these swings produce different discourses that can coexist, challenging and/or reifying each other (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This view on audiences-as-discourses is built on a dialogic assumption of how agency and structure interact to produce swings in discourse³. Changes in behaviour are related to changes in interpretation and changes in material conditions. These changes are all experienced and expressed by, alternatively, academics, media industry professionals, and the people engaging with media products in their daily lives

This is a theoretical essay to discuss these swings in audiences-as-discourses. Given the confines of this essay, a complete, in-depth genealogical analysis of all factors accountable for these swings is not possible. Instead, the change focused on for this paper is the emergence of newer media technologies and their impact on television and film marketing; particularly, how the audience-as-commodity conceptualization influenced the rise of the audience-as-agent conceptualization, which has subsequently influenced the emergence of an audience-as-pusher conceptualization. The evidence for this emergence comes from a series of case studies showing the methods undertaken by the media industry to address the new ways people are engaging with media products in their everyday lives.

As stated, the swing to a new conceptualization and discourse does not preclude the continuation of previous discourses, here being the audience-as-commodity and the audience-as-agent conceptualizations. The conceptualizations are being treated as separate in this paper for purposes of description and elaboration of the conceptualizations, as well as the partial explanations for why the swings occurred. A more thorough analysis of the discourses should focus on the extent to which they overlap and intermingle, and what this says for the complex web of relations that constitute our understanding of audiences-as-discourses.

Audience-as-Commodity

Our first, and most known, conceptualization of the relationship between media producers and consumers has been a linear transmission model (Webster, 1998). Traditionally, the mass media technologies and networks were utilized by the media industry to transmit to the people; any feedback from the people was minimal and oftentimes ignored, unless it came in the form of consumerism. The relationship, as created and studied, constituted the basic operating procedures for an advertising dependent media industry. The television media industry, in particular, created media products that were used to transmit advertisements to the people; an effective media product was one that could be demonstrated as causing certain peoples to buy the advertised goods (Meehan, 2007; Smythe, 1977). Being able to show this causation would allow the media industry to sell their media products to advertisers who desired to reach those people. Thus, the “audience-as-commodity” conceptualization has been seen as the discourse to explain the nature of industry/people relationship since the beginning of advertising-driven content.

Under this model the audience was perceived as an undifferentiated mass whose temporal, spatial and social distance from the producers meant the consumers could not talk back to the producers (McQuail, 1997; Webster, 1998, “audience-as-mass”). There was a clearly delineated difference in identities in connection to a specific media product – you either

produced it or you consumed it. Those who consumed it were the audience for that media product. The people constituting the audience(s) were considered cogs in capitalism's labor system of production and consumption – any activity they demonstrated was considered to be only in the service of the consumption of advertised goods (Mosco & Kaye, 2000), and not for the purposes of meaning-making from the media products (Bratich, 2005). Audiences were divided into a number of subcategories, traditionally along sociodemographic dimensions (Webster, 1998) and increasingly using psychographic measurements (Napoli, 2008).

Audiences were categorized not by determining the audiences' needs, but the industry's needs. Who constituted an "audience" was not constructed by those in the audience, but by those who were in control of the media products; maintaining control over how the audience saw itself gave power to the structure of the Hollywood industry to manipulate the audience for their own goals (Nightingale, 2004). "In the early twenty-first century, marketers, media, and the commercial research firms that work with them are constructing contemporary U.S. audiences as frenetic, self-concerned, attention-challenged, and willing to allow advertisers to track them in response to being rewarded or treated as special." (Turrow, 2005, p. 104). From a reception perspective, the structure of the media industry has had little care for the actual agency of audience – what is done with the product mattered little as long as the product is used.

At the beginning, academic research was likewise most interested in understanding the people as passive consumers and cultural dupes that were either unwilling or unable to resist the power of the media products in determining their thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Webster, 1998, "audience-as-outcome"). From psychological to cultural approaches, research reified the disempowerment of the people to prevent change unto themselves or to affect great change unto the media industry. Research was designed to alleviate public fears about what the mass media was doing to vulnerable populations (Allor, 1988), but the research fueled these fears by "showing" the potential for negative effects to occur.

Eventually, the challenges to this conceptualization of the audience came from within the academy. Although there since the beginning, it was not until the 1950s that serious criticisms were being leveled at media effects research (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). Various approaches, such as uses-and-gratifications, political economy and cultural studies sought to empower the people by understanding their reasons for and reactions to engaging with the media (Webster, 1998). In fact, part of this criticism resulted in the concretizing of this conceptualization. When Dallas Smythe explained what were the basic operating procedures for advertising driven media production, the term "audience-as-commodity" (1977) became the rallying cry for those who sought to act against and change this conceptualization.

Audience-as-Agent

Various reactionary movements began in the academy in the 1950s to swing focus from a passive consumer to an active user of media products. The works of uses-and-gratifications and cultural studies can be seen as attempting to deconstruct this power relationship and provide the people with more voice. More recently, this turn has seen the rise of studies focused on fans and prosumers (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Jenkins, 1992; 2004, 2006; Reinhard, 2008; Ross, 2008; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). This swing did not “discover” new aspects of people’s engaging with media products; instead, the conceptualization is the recognition and laudation of these aspects of people’s engagings as always-already existent (Consalvo, 2003; Cover, 2004; 2006).

In all these approaches, the people are centralized as being actively determinate of selecting and interpreting media products, as well as how they utilize those media products for the construction of their everyday lived conditions. Individuals are celebrated for their activity, even if the activity is constrained within certain sociodemographic categories and relations with sociocultural structures. Empowering the individual has reached its fullest potential with the rise of the “prosumer” as a label for media engaging actions. Theorized since the 1980s (Kotler, 1986), this term is now being applied to explain those people with some level of control over the production of the media products they engage with, with the internet and interactive digital technologies seen as making such consumer control possible and sometimes necessary.

These new academic foci and labels reflect the second conceptualization of the relationships, “audience-as-agent”. This term comes from James Webster (1998), who identified it as a segment of academic research focused on how the person controlled his or her engaging with the media product as exercising power in the relationship. Instead of seeing the people as passive individuals whose singular identity in the relationship was to be commodified, this conceptualization saw the people as partially to completely responsible for the outcome of their engaging with the media product. In this way, the individual person is responsible for his or her engaging. Different approaches have looked at how this activity was involved, from selecting which product to use, when, where and why, to having an influence on the impact of the product on their lives.

The swing in the academic approach to audiences occurred roughly at the same time as the emergence of newer media into the material conditions of society/culture and the people’s everyday lived experiences (Webster, 1998). Primarily, during the past three decades, we have seen the introduction of interactive media technologies, such as the Internet and digital games, as well as the cluttering of the media landscape with a variety of media products, both

technologies and content (McQuail, 1997). The emergences of these material conditions reified the idea of people as active in their media engagements: in order to have their need for the media product gratified, they must actively engage with it, with variance on how much the technology or the person determines the type of interaction (Livingstone, 2003; 2004). The need to actively engage concretized the academic's new conceptualization, and began impacting the media industry's behaviors towards those people who would be audiences.

As "audiences" began to seek out information and entertainment on their terms, to the media industry they became less predictable, more fragmented, and more variable in how, when, where, why they engage with the media. What was once viewed as a unified, undifferentiated mass, an "audience" now must be seen as "plural (i.e. multiple, diverse, fragmented), as active (i.e. selective, self-directed, producers as well as consumers of texts), and as both embedded in and distanced from specific contexts of use." (Livingstone, 1999, p. 64). From the people's perspective, and those academics operating within the audience-as-agent conceptualization, the people became organized and connected; in other words, more empowered, which was seen as a more desirable power balance.

However, with the media industry still operating within the audience-as-commodity discourse, the structure initially reacted against such activity in attempts to retain control. Fans have always actively decentered the official meaning of the media product -- the one intended by the producers -- by dissecting it and sharing pieces and interpretations with one another (Consalvo, 2003); such is a common aspect of meaning-making that arises from any interaction with a text (Cover, 2004; 2006). Until these activities became more prolific online, to the point where they could substitute for the product created by the media industry, they were paid little regard by media producers. Once online, the threat to the sanctity of the producer's control intensified, and the media industry took notice (Powers, 2004).

Before the turn of the century and the concurrent rise of Web 2.0, broadcasters had indicated little concern over the Internet as a competitor to broadcasting; it was just an information and transaction medium rather than an advertising and entertainment medium (Albiniak, 1999, Roscoe, 1999). Indeed, the media industry proceeded to colonize the online terrain to maintain their relationship with the audience as one that they defined. Siapera (2004) outlined several ways the BBC manipulated online content to dictate the types of consumer engagement and thus types of audience expected and accepted by the networks. For the most part, these constructions were replications of offline identities, or more traditionally defined online actions, such as information seeking behavior and playing games. Any one site, by offering myriad types of content and structures, could elicit any combination of these audience

identities. Addressing their users from a variety of prescribed identities continues to be the primary means by which the Hollywood industry can maximize its investment in the content and the site.

For many the idea of the active media consumer was embodied in the individual who was using Napster and other file-sharing software to circumvent purchasing media products. Around the turn of the century, much of the rhetoric in the news centered on this threat and the paradox of the active media consumer -- on how the Internet has helped fans to connect, but also the pitfalls of fans treading on copyright infringement via cyberpiracy (Powers, 2000). This reaction continued into other active audience concepts, such as the fan who engages in digital poaching⁴ or the circulation of spoilers. Companies were varied in their responses, with Viacom aggressively shutting down fansites and The WB trying to bring fan activity under their control (Consalvo, 2003). Lawsuits have been brought against fansites that share confidential information on upcoming movies and television shows (Jensen, 2008), post copyrighted material to their own websites or YouTube, or use torrent structures to share such material.

Once P2P programs like Napster and Bittorent were "regulated", becoming distribution programs operating under the assumptions of the "audience-as-commodity" conceptualization, the industry seemingly became more accepting of the active audience who goes online to find and share information about the industry's media products. Whereas previously the consumer voiced their support or opposition through their consumerism, some producers now seek the audience's feedback during the production and marketing of the media product so as to improve their return on investments and the cultural value of their products (Cover, 2006; Nightingale, 2004; Shefrin, 2004). Such feedback has always occurred within the audience as consumers learned about the media product; now the Internet provides the space for the feedback to circulate more freely and continuously.

As with the BBC's manipulation of their website content in the Siapera study (2004), there has been the realization of the need to provide reasons for the fans to use industry owned-and-operated websites rather than go elsewhere. Erickson (2007), in analyzing online film promotion sites, found that some seek to reproduce the active fan as passive consumer, simplifying the purchasing of movie related merchandise. Other sites bring in some aspects of networking, but focus on fan's interaction with text as part of their purchasing merchandise. Goetzl (2006) reported on how MTV developed MTV Overdrive, an online site to provide fans of music artists more access to the artists and MTV's content. Fewer sites, more from independent film producers, encourage interaction with the text and producers, making the producers accessible to the potential audience as a way to build loyalty through relationships.

One successful interaction between fans and producers is central to Shefrin's (2004) analysis of fans as cultural agents. She compares how Peter Jackson/New Line and George Lucas/Fox interacted with online fans for their most recent movie trilogies. Jackson was from the start very inclusive of fans' opinions, while Lucas was considered more belligerent and dismissive of fans. Using Bourdieu's analysis of media as symbolic capital, Shefrin extended Jenkin's work on participatory culture to consider fans as "agents of consecration" who play a role in creating the collective belief about the text with fans' approval or disapproval acting as a translator or "canary in a coal mine". The study argued that the inclusion of fans by Jackson/New Line led to a more harmonious relationship that was beneficial for the film series, and that such a relationship can provide guidelines for future endeavors.

The success of Jackson/New Line exemplifies a change in the relationship between producer and consumer and how the dissolution of the producer-consumer boundary, at first feared by the industry, can be co-opted by the industry to their benefit. Fearing not the dissolution, but using it for the producer's benefit, leads to the latest discourse to emerge to conceptualize the relationships. As Neuman (1991) argued, the changes in media use will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, and this balancing act between media producers and consumers is resulting in the evolution of a new conceptualization.

Audience-as-Pusher

As the media industry has moved closer to recognizing their relationship with their potential audiences as active agents, academic conceptualizations likewise swung further away from their conceptualizations of the audience as mass and passive. The focus on fans as the future understanding of what is an audience(s), termed "fanification" by Nikunen (2007), is evidence of this swing. Also, the rising use of "prosumer", and related terms like "prosumption", "co-creation" and "user-generated", focus on the blurring or dissolution of the dichotomy established in the audience-as-commodity discourse (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). As discussed above, these are all terms associated primarily with the audience-as-agent conceptualization among the academics and the people, with unspoken to negative responses by the media industry. However, when Time magazine made Web 2.0 their person of the year in 2006 (Grossman, 2006), within short time people who had not been considering the audience-as-agent began to acknowledge and accept the new relationship.

Acceptance of the audience-as-agent has prodded the media industry to seek ways to utilize fans and prosumers to help them distribute their wares, creating the "audience-as-pusher" conceptualization. Pusher refers to lingo associated with drug dealing, in that a drug dealer can be called a pusher. The new conceptualization emerges from the recognition of an active

audience as a requirement in a marketplace being overtaken by the new media (Kotler, 1986), combined with the ever present need of the industry to create and maintain a loyal and reliable consumer-base (Meehan, 2000; Ross, 2008). From the “audience-as-agent” construct, an active audience produces enthusiastic energy and cultural capital that may either propel or derail a media product. But from the “audience-as-commodity” construct, the industry must have some level of control over the consumers of their products in order to ensure advertising revenue. The synthesis of these factors has compelled some in the industry to experiment with ways of harvesting the audience’s potential and actual activity(s) for their own benefit. Through the acceptance and cooptation of agency, the structure does not fundamentally change what it needs and wants, but instead swings to accommodate the new requirements, producing a new relationship between producers and consumers. In other words, audience activity(s) is being hegemonized into patterns the media industry prefers (Consalvo, 2003).

Various strategies have evolved from the industry (termed “collaborationists” by Jenkins, 2006) as they shift from a negative view on audience activity(s) to a more positive one, encouraging and providing the space for this activity. The media industry increasingly relies on *direct cooptation*, *viral marketing* and *gameplay marketing* as strategies to create and spread interest in their products. Each strategy will be defined next, but a lengthier discussion is held for the third term, as it represents a combination of the previous two, as well as the most complex strategy to co-opt what is possible with the internet and related audience activity(s).

Direct cooptation

Perhaps the most obvious action of the media industry under the audience-as-pusher concept is direct cooptation of the activities people engage in away from industry controlled websites. Direct cooptation would include any instance when the producer’s official website sanctions the activities they had once sought to shut down by providing space and content for these activities. This cooptation can be seen in both in fiction and non-fiction media products. The initial and more recent reaction to the problem of spoilers is one indication of this trend. The Hollywood industry traditionally sought to squelch all attempts by the audience of upcoming products to learn the details of those products. However, spoilers have become so ubiquitous online that instead of hunting down those who spread them, some producers have begun sharing less important information to pacify information-hungry fans, thereby protecting more important details through misdirection (Jensen, 2008). On the non-fiction side, many established news organizations are requesting and using user-generated news stories (Learmouth, 2007). From ABC to CNN, news websites have upload forms for submissions that are then displayed on their sites, alongside news produced by employed journalists.

However, in order to participate by uploading and sharing one's own ideas and creations, people must agree to the producers' Terms of Service. When NBC/Universal created an official website to be the premiere site for fan activities for the consumption of their serial, *Heroes* (Woodson, 2007), the site also included a gallery for fans to upload their fanart, or artwork featuring characters from the series -- as long as they agree that by submitting their work that they are giving NBC/Universal...

"...the right to alter and/or edit the Submission or any part or element thereof. NBC/UNIVERSAL and its licensees, successors and assigns have the right to use any and all Submissions for future advertising, promotion and publicity in any manner and in any medium now known or hereafter devised throughout the world in perpetuity."

The entire clause for the terms of submission can be found at nbc.com/Heroes/auction/fan_submitTerms.shtml. A similar Terms of Service was written by Sony Pictures for the film *District 9*, found at sonypictures.com/corp/tos.html. Such clauses are non-existent in non-industry controlled spaces for fans to share their products, as fans retain copyright control over their creations.

Why would fans be willing to give producers such control over their creative work? Part of this cooptation's success lies in establishing a feeling of magnanimity by creating the sense that the producers are encouraging fans to engage with their favorite media product to ultimately help shape it. Such magnanimity is possible if one believes the reason fans produce their own interpretations in fanart and fanfiction is because they want to have a say in what happens (Costello & Moore, 2007). To capture this desire, the producers create ways in which the consumers can feel they are making a difference for the object of their affection, even if that impact is minor. These actions by NBC/Universal extend their attempts to directly co-opt the actions of fans by carefully housing such actions on their website. Such was the construction NBC presented of itself at the 2007 Comic-Con, the largest gathering of science fiction fans in the United States. The *Heroes* producers, in a session I attended, discussed their desire to increase the fans' involvement in their series, such as by providing clips for fans to digitally poach and create their own fanvids. What was left unsaid, as characteristic for this emerging conceptualization, is that such involvement is on their terms.

Viral marketing

A growing segment of the media industry's current marketing approach relies on the cooptation of the social networking phenomenon that has become increasingly apparent in audience activity(s) (Ross, 2008); the word-of-mouth (WOM) and viral marketing approaches. The logic of word-of-mouth marketing existed prior to the new mediascape, building on the research of two-step communication flow and opinion leaders from the 1940s (Mosco & Kaye,

2000). The goal of such marketing is to create buzz, or favorable opinions and infectious excitement about a product, through existing social networks that are now largely mediated through the Internet and World Wide Web (Rosen, 2000).

As Rosen (2000) indicates in his analysis of what makes buzz work for producers, the more actively engaged the potential consumers are with the product, the more likely they will spread buzz on that product, thereby increasing the likelihood that the product will successfully diffuse within the consumer-base. Although it is discussed here separate from direct co-optation, those attempts hope to structure the online, virtual spaces to become places of playing for audiences and fans to play with their own creation and the creations of the media industry. It is hoped that this pleasure will translate into buzz that is then spread virally through actual and potential audiences (Ross, 2008).

Viral marketing itself is the buzzword in the Hollywood; built on the concept of WOM marketing, viral marketing is concerned with how the Internet provides both the impetus and the structure for people to spread information and opinions about a product. Unlike face-to-face communication, the buzz spread online can be multimedia; this means advertising campaigns can be created that do not have the normal characteristics of promotional material which may dissuade younger, more savvy consumers. Instead, the intent can become invisible, an “obscured invitation” (Ross, 2008), that the audience spreads around because they find the content interesting (entertaining and/or informative), not because they desire to persuade their friends and family; persuasion is a side effect, even if it is the desired end result for producers.

When applied to the relationships discussed here, the goal is to co-opt audience activity to spread buzz (Cover, 2006; Deuze, 2007a, b; Siapera, 2004). The idea is to use what fans and active audiences already do – talk about upcoming and existing media products -- to help the industry insure a reliable consumer-base to sell to advertisers. Instead of the traditional transmission model, where the media industry attempts to push products onto the masses, in this approach the consumers are recruited to be pushers. In fact, it is the reliance on viral marketing that truly manifests this conceptualization of the audience-as-pusher.

Classic viral marketing techniques are increasingly found for many media products. Indeed, Harry Knowles, founder of Aintitcoolnews.com, argued viral marketing – that is, the actions of the fans online – was responsible for the success of the Warner Brother’s movie *300* (2007). For the most part, viral marketing is used to distribute film clips, such as trailers, that are clearly identifiable with the media product being promoted. In rare occasions, however, will a viral marketing campaign attempt to create buzz by the secrecy of how the information links to the final product. It is this more advanced form of utilizing viral marketing that introduces the

final strategy discussed in this paper, especially as it involves the toggling between online and offline audience activity(s).

Gameplay marketing.

Over the past decade, the media industry has increasingly engaged in gameplay marketing as to capitalize on audience activity(s) as “lightning in a bottle” (Ross, 2008). This ten year trend can be seen in Figure 1, which accounts for known campaigns up to April 1, 2009; this figure reflects the increase in the use of this strategy, but it is not an exhaustive accounting of all television series and films to have used this strategy. Interactive marketing structures into the campaign the ability and requirement for the consumer to engage actively with the advertisement in order for the advertisement to make sense, be informative and ultimately be persuasive. One form of such marketing campaigns capitalizes on ideas of gameplay, and it is no mistake that these campaigns emerged with the rise of digital games. The sensibility is the same across the two forms – the need to interact with the product for it to produce content for consumption. In both instances, the producer structures the encounter with the media product, more or less dictating the means by which the consumer will engage with the product. Of course, this has always been the traditional relationship between producers and consumers, however, the goal for these newer media products is on less obvious structuring, allowing more freedom to the consumer in determining the process of the engaging.

The reason “gameplay marketing” is term used here instead of “interactive marketing” is that the latter can refer to the previous two strategies. In order for an industry website to directly co-opt the creations of its consumers, it must have interactive capabilities for the consumers to feedback information to the producers. In order for an industry to capitalize on viral marketing schemes, individuals must be allowed to interact with the advertisement as well as each other. Similarly, in order for gameplay marketing to work, these forms of interactivity are required. Additionally, individuals must have the sense of interacting with the content that in some way that resembles the structure of a digital game. As most digital games are intended to be entertaining, and thereby provide pleasure, the marketing strategy hopes to engender the goodwill created by having fun with the games as a way to create buzz that will then spread virally through the social networks of those who played the games.

This marketing scheme utilizes the nature of the newer, interactive media to enhance an individual’s experience with a media product that traditionally is non-interactive, such as a motion picture and a television series (Ross, 2008). One explanation for audience activity(s) is the desire to expand their engaging with the media product. Fan activities such as fanfiction are active attempts to tell more stories dealing with the characters and plot points from the original

product – to tell a story a different way or to explore a different relationship between characters (Reinhard, 2008a). The creation of this fiction can be seen as an attempt by the fans to further their engagement with this object of affection as they push at the boundaries of the universe as defined by the original producers. Recognizing this activity, some media producers now create their own expanded, enhanced canon for fans to engage. Such enhancements are best understood by example, and such examples indicate at least four types of gameplay marketing: within website; across websites; across platforms; between online and offline.

Within website gameplay. When a website for a media product contains within it some form of game that is related to the media product, then that website is an example of this form of gameplay marketing. The game, or games, could be any of the variety of genres that occur online, from action/adventure to puzzle games. A common occurrence of this marketing scheme is found on websites for children's cable and broadcast programming, where various games will be offered that connect with different series (Rockwell, 2007; White & Preston, 2005); examples include the games offered by Nickelodeon at nick.com that can be found categorized by show. As video and computer games are traditionally thought of as the domain of children, it is logical to find this form of marketing targeting that demographic. Similarly, digital games are likewise considered as hobbies for science fiction and fantasy fans, such as those who would be the target audience for the SciFi Channel; thus, in 2008, the cable network began offering tie-in games for several of their shows.

Another form this subset of the gameplay marketing manifests as can be found in marketing campaigns where within the website a contest occurs that requires the audience to complete a puzzle or series of puzzles to compete for prizes. Prizes and puzzles vary, but they are connected to the content of the advertised media product. One complicated version of this approach ran from December 2008 to February 2009 for the cable television series, *Leverage*. Through standard television commercials, the audience was invited to log into leveragehq.com to complete a series of puzzles designed to reflect the characters and plot of the series. As the series focused on a group of criminals who work to help people fight back against corrupt businesses, the games represented thieving, stealth, technology, con, and other talents the characters possessed. After completing all these games, the audience had a chance to win a cash prize. Every week there was also a trivia contest in which the audience had to answer a question about that week's episode for a chance to be entered to win other prizes.

Across websites gameplay. This subset of gameplay marketing manifests when a puzzle game is developed to occur not just in one website clearly related to the media product, but in other websites that can only be linked to the media product by knowledge of what the

media product is. In other words, an experience is created online that enhances the experience gained by engaging with the original media product (television series or movie) because the additional websites portray themselves as representing some aspect of that original media product – representing that aspect as if is reality, that the individual has stepped into the world of the media product by engaging with those websites. Oftentimes these websites remediated structures common to websites for actual entities, such as businesses, organizations, individuals' blogs and even media companies.

The classic example of this approach was created for the ABC television series *Lost* – the construction of which Ross (2008) detailed. Dubbed the *The Lost Experience*, this enhanced experience began in the spring of 2006 in the United States and continued over the summer as an attempt to provide the loyal fan with more information and puzzles to hold their interest during the hiatus. The experience consisted of commercials prompting visits to websites to watch a series of online videos, focusing around the revelation of a series' plot point, the Hanso Foundation. Central to this experience, when it was first launched, was a character created specifically to engage with fans through her blog and to lead them through their discoveries of the Hanso Foundation. Since that first experience, the producers of *Lost* have launched other websites focused on the fake airline from the series, Oceanic Air (flyoceanicair.com), the search for truth of the island (find815.com) and continual interest in the Hanso Foundation and the Dharma Initiative. Indeed, the most recent site, for Octagon Global Recruiting, clearly indicated its link to the original producer with an "ABC Inc" copyright notice at the bottom.

Fans who sought out and consumed all aspects of this expanded universe received some insight into the Foundation that would have an integral role in the series. While the fictional Foundation was integral to the show, the additional information was not. Thus, those fans or more casual viewers who did not experience this information were not confused when the series began again that fall. As the series continued, the maintenance of the online experience was a way to maintain loyal fans who wanted more engagement with the show when it was not made available to them – especially when the series moved into a reduced broadcasting schedule in the 2007/08 season to extend the life of the series for ABC.

Across platforms gameplay. At first glance, this subset would appear very similar to the previous subset of gameplay marketing. Both heavily rely on the creation of remediated fictional websites. However, the distinction for this subset is found in the fact that this attempt to manufacture a perception of realness is not restricted to websites. Other newer media technologies are brought into the game, thereby spreading the places the person can find an

enhanced experience to other platforms, encroaching further into the person's media environment and everyday life.

For the broadcast television series, *Heroes*, NBC/Universal created an enhanced experience that requests the audience to travel across various websites, into a virtual world, and receive SMS on their cell phones to experience more of the universe created in the television series. This expanded experience is called *Heroes: Evolutions*. Similar to the design for *Lost*, *Evolutions* has a series of websites connected to various aspects of the television serial: a paper company; a Las Vegas casino; a minor character's blog; and research companies. There are a series of puzzles across these sites, where fans could learn more about the universe of the show by putting the pieces together. The information provided were not spoilers for the show as much as they were spoilers for the expanded universe – new websites, new online characters, and so forth. Given the hiatuses due to the WGA strike, these online activities were intensified to provide the loyal fan with their weekly “fix” of a new experience with their object of affection, as doled out by the producers.

Additionally, if you signed up for the experience, you would receive the occasional email and text message from a secondary character alerting you to what needed to be done in this universe. From October, 2007 through May, 2008, I received 33 text messages from “46622”, the handle for secondary character Hana Gitelman, asking me to do various activities online. I have received similar emails with nearly the same requests. Since the beginning of the fourth chapter of the series, the emails switched to being sent by “Rebel”, a character in the show who initially appeared only via networked technologies like phones and the internet. Using Rebel to connect the canon and the expanded experience helped to create an immersive experience for fans who perhaps, on some level, wished they could become part of the series.

Additionally, in the fall of 2009, NBC attempted to colonize a virtual world. Habbo.com is a virtual world that operates within standard internet browsers and represents itself as a virtual world primarily targeted towards and populated by teenagers. As such, marketing in this world is an attempt to reach a vocal and prized demographic. The colonization attempt focused on creating a group for Habbo residents to become members of and receive powers like those on the television series. A character was created inworld to be the face of NBC's *Heroes*, and there was an attempt to tie the inworld activities to the series with the same mysterious paintings in the show appearing around the world of Habbo. However, compared to the other online activities created for this marketing campaign, less has been accomplished in Habbo. Yet, the fact that NBC/Universal attempted to move their marketing into this platform furthers the

analysis of this strategy as attempting to maximize the locations through which it can reach its target audience.

Between online and offline gameplay. When an extended experience moves across different media platforms, creates a sense of realism for the experience so as to immerse the audience in the fictional world of the media product, and brings this online experience into the physical, material world of the audience, then this subset of the marketing strategy appears. This subset sees combination for all three previous as well as incorporation of sensibilities from alternative reality games (ARGs) (Miller, 2004) or pervasive gaming (Walther, 2006). These games are constructed to occur across various media platforms that serve as the impetus and information sources for online and offline activities that are required to be completed individually and cooperatively for the game to progress. When this form of gaming is harnessed, the result is a massively organized and orchestrated marketing strategy designed to immerse the potential consumer in a realized fictional world with the hope of producing positive buzz that would be spread through a social network.

Such was a campaign that the producers for *The Dark Knight* movie began in May 2007 with the website, ibelieveinharveydent.com, containing nothing more than actor Aaron Eckhart as Harvey Dent in an election poster. At this point in time, there had been no official studio release of any images for this film beside that of The Batman in his new suit. A few days later this website morphed into ibelieveinharveydenttoo.com, where the image of Harvey was vandalized with the black eyes and red smile of The Joker. Below this image was an email request field. Upon entering an email address, the person received an email with a code and was directed back to the site. After entering this code, one pixel from the Dent poster was removed. After thousands of others entered codes, the pixilation revealed our first official image of actor Heath Ledger as The Joker. This activity was to be the first of many online activities The Joker would call upon his henchmen, the moniker under which they were recruited, to perform.

The first offline activity occurred at Comic-Con that July. On Friday morning, people were walking around with the same face make-up as The Joker. They were asking people to join them and handing out fake dollar bills with George Washington's face deformed. It was not until later that day we discovered why. They were told to go to a website, whysoserious.com. This website had a fake police report about The Joker terrorizing Comic-Con to recruit accomplices. We knew this site was official, because, based on the activities of the conventioners, it revealed the official teaser trailer for the film. That website subsequently changed into rent-a-clown.com to show the images of all those who participated in this activity.

This activity was occurring during the official, advertised Warner Brothers' presentation inside the convention center – a presentation in which there was no official information from Warner Brothers about the film. Again, foregoing traditional marketing methods, the producers of this film decided on this interactive marketing ploy, complete with a fake Joker arriving in a limousine.

After Comic-Con, there were numerous Joker related activities that revealed more images, posters, trailers, film clips and even tickets for an IMAX screening of six minutes of footage. All these activities were initiated through some variation of the *whysoserious.com* site, or by finding other websites deformed by the Joker. The Joker asked his henchmen to perform various activities, from taking pictures of themselves at certain places in select cities as his henchmen, to going and retrieving special cakes that contained cell phones for later instructions. Of all the sites constructed for this campaign, at least a dozen directly dedicated to this storyline of The Joker. Even the untimely death of actor Heath Ledger in January, while perhaps delaying it, did not stop this trajectory of the campaign.

Similar online and offline activities focused on the other two main characters of the movie, Harvey Dent, aka Two-Face, and The Batman (Reinhard, 2008b)⁵. The Dent activities focused on the character's fight against police corruption and his election for Gotham City district attorney. The activities included websites, phone calls from Dent opponents, user-generated campaign videos, and campaign tours to cities across the United States in the Dentmobile. The Batman activities focused on a blog of his supporters and a news' website asking for people to upload sightings of the crimefighter while also running a talk show questioning his legality. While the main protagonist, Batman, had the least activities associated with him, this reduced presence in the campaign was most likely due to his character having been previously introduced in the current representation through the film, *Batman Begins*. It was the representations of the two villains of the movie that was novel to this film; perhaps to allay fears and disapproval from fans about the representations, the producers sought out a new means by which to introduce the characters, to make fans feel more ownership of the characters by playing at helping them through the various activities.

With this case study we can see the complexities possible when addressing the potential audience with a gameplay marketing strategy. Fans of the canon were mobilized to perform a number of activities over more than a year in order to receive information about a movie many were highly anticipating. The campaign proceeded to expand the universe that had begun to be constructed in the first movie done by these producers, *Batman Begins*, so as to incorporate all the characters and plot points that would be revealed in this sequel. However, the expansion

was not a unilateral transmission of information from producers to consumers. Instead it required highly active fans to complete various puzzles, which required such fans to energize others to hasten the achievement. What resulted were various fansites, blogs and message boards that lit up with fans' conversations with one another, sharing information about the puzzles and the means to complete them. All elements of cooptation thereby combined to produce a feeling of engagement with the final product in a novel way, as seen by the consumers, and yet in a predictable and controlled way, as seen by the producers.

Was it a successful marketing ploy? On three different measures of success, the answer appears to be yes. The film was a box office phenomenon, breaking records for United States domestic revenue during its release (A.P., 2008; Bowles, 7/27/08; Rich, 2008). Opening at midnight on 3,040 screens, the movie made \$18.4 million, and the total for opening on a Friday brought in an additional \$67.8 million. Over the weekend, it had no competition, bringing in \$158.3 million. It then went on to break records for how quickly it pass the \$200 million mark (5 days), the \$300 million mark (10 days) and the \$400 million mark (18 days). The film eventually became only the second in US motion picture history to make more than \$500 million domestically – at \$527 million it is second only to *Titanic* – and it has earned over \$1 billion internationally (Boucher, 2008). With a budget estimated at \$185 million, the profit from the film for the producers was five-fold.

That is the economic measurement. For a critical measurement, the film was hailed by film critics for its performances, complex storylines and overall tone. The film criticism website, Rotten Tomatoes, which aggregates the reviews from film critics across the media, gathered reviews from 264 critics; the average rating was 8.5 out of 10, with an overall “fresh” rating of 94%. Almost as soon as the movie was released, critics began speculating on the possibility of Academy Award nominations for the film, particularly the performance of the late Heath Ledger, an award he did win. Regular moviegoers agreed with the opinions of film critics. At the Internet Movie Database, votes cast by 358,124 users gave the film 9 out of 10, making it the fourth highest acclaimed movie on the database⁶. At Yahoo! Movies, while 14 film critics gave the movie an A-, 66,363 moviegoers gave it an A.

However, there are other reasons for the success of the film other than the marketing campaign. The untimely death of Heath Ledger created a post-mortem curiosity about a performance that began generating buzz from the images and trailers (Bowles, 7/20/08). As the early campaign focused on The Joker, his death may have provided extra buzz to the movie. The impact of Ledger's death could have brought in his fans and other curious people who would not have normally seen a superhero movie. As for superhero fans, the legions of Batman

fans would have seen the film regardless of a campaign designed to co-opt their affection for it; director Christopher Nolan had earned their respect with his first film, *Batman Begins*. The marketing campaign was designed to capitalize on these fans, but they were the ones most likely to see the movie without it. The question is then, why this approach at all?

One possible answer to this question represents an interesting post-modern account of our lives. Nolan, in making *Batman Begins*, highlighted his desire to make the character and the universe more realistic – a trend very common in Hollywood superhero films since Bryan Singer's *X-Men*. The desire for realism was a reaction against the abysmal failure of *Batman and Robin* and could be seen in the “reimagined” design of iconic aspects of the universe, such as his origin story, The Batman's suit and his Batmobile. Perhaps in keeping with this desire for realism, the fictional city of Gotham was given realistic websites for what would be real services -- such as banks, railways, travel agents, ferries, cable news – to further the sense that this Gotham is a real place, just as “real” as any other community that provides connections to such public services online. For the fans, Gotham further stepped off the pages of comic books and into our modern notion of reality, a reality increasingly mediated through our interactions with online sites instead of geographical and physical ones.

Conclusions

This essay argues that there exists a dialogue between three factors in defining audiences. The dialogue between academics, the media industry and the material conditions of people has constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed the relationships constituting audiences by how they discuss and act towards the phenomenon of engaging with media products. Changes in the actions of one part of this triad can impact the other two parts. This influence was witnessed when the academic discourse swung from audience-as-commodity to audience-as-agent, and is again occurring with the emergence of audience-as-pusher.

Through the distribution of their scholarship on the audience, academics' beliefs become reified in popular and industry discourses, such that the media industry and the people themselves take up such conceptualizations in discussing engagements with media products. For the people, it reifies how they see their own behaviour and that of others. For the media industry, it alters how professionals design, market and distribute their products, changing their behaviours to those they seek to coalesce into an audience. The end result of the swing to audience-as-agent, combined with the increasing presence of certain material conditions such as Web 2.0, has been the emerging audience-as-pusher conceptualization.

Although he did not voice the conceptualization of the “audience-as-pusher” in his discussion of the nature of media audiences, James Webster did evoke this relationship when

calling for an approach to understanding audiences that accounted for the interplay of structure and agency. Indeed, he implied what I have argued was necessary to move from audience-as-agent to audience-as-pusher. "If, for some reason, individual agents were to 'act otherwise,' institutional structures would adapt, supporting and promoting new patterns." (1998, p. 201). The cooptation constituting the latest conceptualization occurs when one understands the relationship between the media industry and the people as a dialogue between agency and structure. The people, always-already active and interactive in their engaging with media products, had such activity highlighted by the rise of the current mediascape and the celebration of such agency by academics. While initially seeing audience activity(s) as a threat to their control over the production/consumption of media products, the media industry has begun to respond by capitalizing on the activity for their own purposes – to capture lightning in a bottle.

In a sense, this emerging conceptualization is an attempt for both the structure and the agents to be gratified without feeling threatened by what the other is doing. The media industry can maximize their investments while minimizing their risk by utilizing a sustainable resource in the activities of devoted and loyal consumers. The people can continue the activities they have a fondness for, including receiving industry approved spoilers and other tidbits to discuss. Because the industry is dependent upon the people to market for them, the people have the power to prevent their own demise as active consumers. Should the people wish to, they could change their actions, and a structure desiring to continue to capitalize on the relationship would have to reciprocate the change.

I would consider Giddens's structuration theory to be the most likely and useful approach as we move into understanding the current state of affairs (Giddens, 1984). The relationship between structure and agency allows for a more circular, nonlinear causal relationship, whereby changes in the one will impact the other. If we look back over that time span of 40 years, we can see this symbiosis occurring. The structure, here the capitalist media industry, began to introduce new channels and technology that offered more types of media use and engagement. However, because the amount of total time possible to spend with such media cannot likewise increase for the majority of people, that means the media user had to begin to make more active choices in what media would be used when and where. To the industry's viewpoint, this means their potential audience was fragmenting -- by giving people more things to choose from, the industry had simultaneously reduced the number of people who were likely to be consuming one specific thing at any given time. The structure modified the agency, but then the agency modified the structure as the industry adjusted to this fragmentation and expanded their offerings to take advantage of it. The more the industry offered, the more the media user

became active, and the more the industry saw them as fragmented and thus became determined to address them as such, thereby locking them into this position as being always-already active. From cable to the internet, this spiraling pattern has not varied, as we now see the industry securing aspects of the internet to further maintain this conception of their relationship with the active audience.

The academy can investigate this structure/agency interaction, either separately, as they have routinely done, or in combination. Research of the “audience-as-commodity” has tended to be purview of political economists who document structure and activities of the media industry to manufacture products and audiences (Meehan, 2007). The tendency for studying the “audience-as-agent” through ethnographies and interviews has been the critical/cultural approach to understand the resistance to the media industry’s creation of media messages (Meehan, 2000). The rise of the “audience-as-pusher” calls for the unification of these two approaches, to understand the actions of both the media industry and the media consumers. Such a marriage of political economical and critical/cultural approaches have been called for by others (Murdoch, 2000), mirroring the call for understanding the intersection of the text and the user for meaning-making (Livingstone, 1990).

A marketing campaign as conducted by Warner Brothers for *The Dark Knight* provides the type of field to be delved into for both ethnographic analysis of the consumers and structural analysis of the producers. Studying this new terrain of reception would also bring us closer to understanding the balance that occurs between producers and consumers – not only the balance but the simultaneity of the seeming contradiction that the producer can be the consumer at nearly the same moment the consumer is the producer. The emerging discourse has opened up this new terrain for those interested in the reception of mediated messages, and from it can a new understanding of communication between these two positions be created – a relationship that finally moves from the transmission model to a dialogic model. With the environment of the new mediascape, the chasm that has separated media producers and media consumers in time and space is quickly disappearing. A phenomenon like *The Dark Knight* marketing campaign is just one example of how the chasm is being filled in.

However, the audience-as-pusher discourse highlights many potential pitfalls with this emerging relationship. Issues of exploitation, copyright infringement, and creative and intellectual property are concerned with the co-opting of people’s time and labor for the ultimate benefit of the media industry. The waiver required by NBC/Universal for fans to post their *Heroes* creations is one example where the legal nature of copyrights clashes with the creative property of fans, inviting concerns of exploiting fans’ good intentions and high affectations for

the show to further their own economic interests. Concepts such as hegemony can be applied to this relationship, and the position of people as being active or passive in the cooptation is likewise applicable to theorizing this relationship. That is, to what extent are the people aware of the machinations of the media industry; or if they are aware, to what extent does the knowledge affect their engaging with the media product?

The illustration of the audience-as-pusher discourse has focused more on the relationship between the media industry and the people, leaving out an analysis of the relationships between the academics and the other two factors. Such an analysis is just as important to understand how academics play a role in reifying and/or challenging this emergent conceptualization. This analysis would be in its infancy, as only now are scholars addressing this issue of cooptation (for example, Deuze, 2007a; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008). It is hoped that by highlighting this new terrain, more examples of cooptation can be empirically addressed in more depth and under more theoretical scrutiny than was available in this essay. As the number of online sites allowing sharing, sending, embedding, uploading and downloading of media products increases, and as more media industries turn to some type of cooptation to market their media products, this emergent discourse strengthens and calls out to be studied.

Footnotes

- 1) As noted also by James Webster (1998), audience(s) here relate to the people engaging with products, both as technologies and as content, distributed through some mass media system, and not the audience present for a theatrical or musical performance or sporting or athletic competition.
- 2) While there are applications of the marketing schemes discussed in this paper in the music and digital game industries, this paper focuses on the television industry and the film industry originating from Hollywood and New York City, due to a) the original conceptualization of audience-as-commodity applying to television studies and b) traditional conceptualization of the passive reception of the narratives displayed in both motion pictures and television.
- 3) While my conception of the structure/agency argument comes largely from Anthony Giddens' work on structuration theory (1976/1993; 1979/2002; 1984), Watsuji Tetsuro's examination of man/society (1937/1971), and Judith Butler's work on performance and subjection (1988, 1997). It is also influenced by Brenda Dervin's (2003) work on the Sense-Making Methodology and James Webster's (1998) discussion of audiences to account for the coexistence of structure/agency and the extent to which both are influenced by the actions and interpretations of the other.
- 4) Digital poaching is an extension of Henry Jenkins' term of "textual poaching" (1992), used to describe the actions of fans who rework some aspect of a media product's narrative that they did not originate. Digital poaching means the manipulation of many different aspects of the media product, from video to audio, possible with digital tools for editing and exhibiting.
- 5) More information about the entire *Dark Knight* marketing campaign can be found in an earlier version of the paper presented at IAMCR 2008 in Stockholm. Additionally, I followed this marketing campaign from the first to the last activity on my blog, ourmediapolis.blogspot.com. The blog contains links, screenshots, and other bloggers' discussions of the entire campaign, as well as my comments as the campaign as active.
- 6) All information about critics' and audience reception is current as of March 30, 2009.

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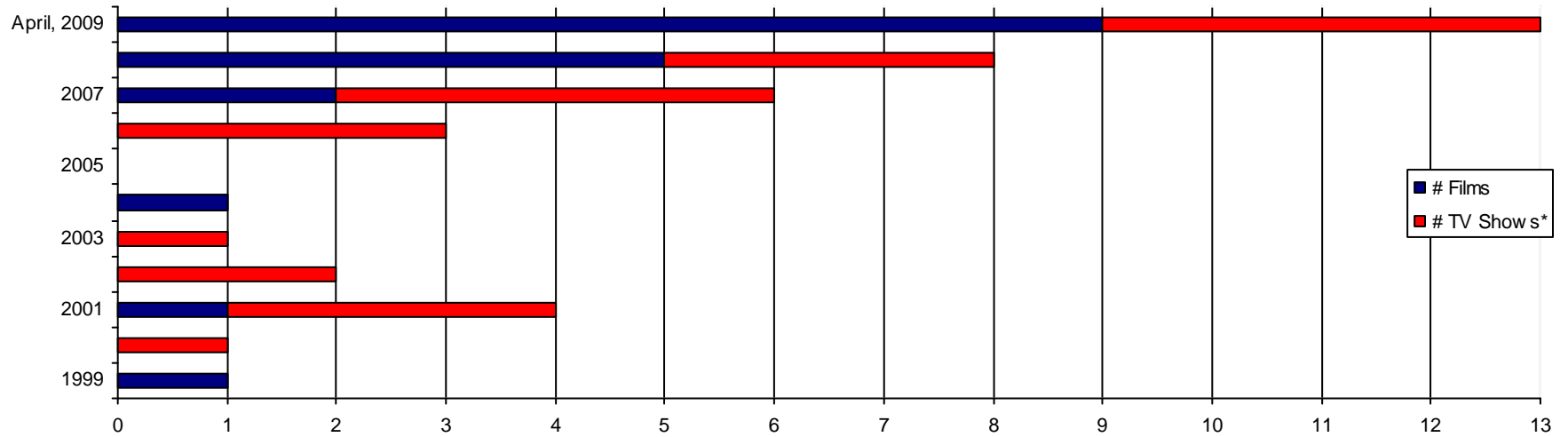
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* Television series are listed for the year the marketing campaign begins; series on the air as of April 2009 continue to run their gameplay marketing strategy.

April, 2009	Surrogate	Angels & Demons	District 9	Watchmen	Terminator: Salvation	Aliens & Monsters	X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Dragonball: Evolution	2012	The Ghost Whisperer	24	Chuck	Dollhouse
2008	Hancock	Vantage Point	Wall-E	Cloverfield	Eagle Eye	Scifi Channel	Fringe	Leverage					
2007	The Host	The Dark Knight	Heroes	Numb3rs	Jericho	Smallville							
2006	Lost	Kyle XY	The Fallen										
2004	The Village												
2003	Kids WB!												
2002	Alias	Push, Nevada											
2001	A.I.	Nickelodeon	Disney Channel	Fox Kids									
2000	Freakylinks												
1999	The Blair Witch Project												

Figure 1. Sample distribution of gameplay marketing campaigns from 1999 to April 2009