9-10-2023

Proceedings of IASDR 2023: Life-changing Design

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Citation

THE 2023

IASDR Congress

Life-changing design

Milan 9th—13th October

PROCEEDINGS OF IASDR 2023

EDITORS:

Daniela De Sainz Molestina
Laura Galluzzo
Francesca Rizzo
Davide Spallazzo

iasdr

POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863

SCUOLA DEL DESIGN
DIPARTIMENTO DI DESIGN

POLI.DESIGN
FOUNDED BY POLITECNICO DI MILANO

Life-Changing Design

Proceedings of the 10th Congress of the International Association of Societies of Design Research (IASDR 2023)

EDITORS:

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Laura Galluzzo
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Proceedings of the 2023 IASDR Congress
International Association of Societies of Design Research International Congress
9 – 13 October 2023
Milan, Italy
www.iasdr2023.polimi.it

Cover and congress identity design by Daniela de Sainz Molestina
Proceedings compiled by Lenny Martinez Dominguez

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Fictional brand design. Evolution and strategies of visual identities in audiovisual narratives

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Brands tell stories to affirm their values, positioning, and identity. They tell stories that allow people to recognise themselves in them, to share them, to feel part of them. That occurs in the real world as in the world of fiction. The term fictional branding refers to the design and use of brands that do not refer to any existing service, product, company, or organisation. They can include any brand referring to products or commercial services, political institutions, military organisations, and more. This paper aims to offer a comprehensive look at the topic through historical and theoretical research and analyses the state of the art of the practice. Specifically, we will deepen fictional brands' role in building engaging, believable and memorable stories and narratives. In order to carry out a more precise and in-depth analysis, we defined a specific field of investigation: that of long-form narrative audiovisual works, thus including films, TV series and video games. The result of the research is currently merged into an online platform named Fictional Brands Archive. The website allows users to consult an extensive collection of fictional brands accompanied by information and visual material.

Keywords: fictional brand; branding; visual identity; entertainment

1   Introduction

Recently, we have all experienced the increased consumption of streaming and TV series and the distortion of reality similar to a sci-fi film, especially during and after the pandemic. This relationship between reality and fiction has often been observed in novels, comic books, films, TV series and video games. The subject of this paper is brands' role in these fictional worlds, whether corporate or governmental. The role of those who design these brands and all the touchpoints useful in translating a story into engaging, believable, and memorable narratives will also be explored.

By analysing brands in literature, films, and TV series, it is possible to outline the changes these entities have undergone within the collective imagination and popular culture. Through this analysis, it is possible to understand the evolution of the entertainment industry and brand design as a discipline. We can observe the shift from atomistic and structuralist ideas, typical of the 60s' literature (Henrion

& Parkin, 1967), to more fluid and liquid ones, influenced by postmodern and evolutionary concepts about identity (Olins, 1996; 2014). We can observe the evolution from monodimensional to pluridimensional and pervasive entities (Felsing, 2010; van Nes, 2012; Guida, 2014).

In order to fully understand the topic, a brief history of brands in audiovisual narratives and an overview of the relationship between graphic design and industry are necessary. Then, through the evolution of narrative world-building modes, we will approach the creation of imaginary worlds. Finally, the analysis of different practices in producing audiovisual products, inside and outside fiction, will introduce us to the main result of this research: the Fictional Brands Archive.

2 Brief history of brands in stories

The development of joint-stock companies in England, primarily associated with exploiting overseas colonies, made the British public one of the first to develop a growing scepticism of private enterprises. That resulted from numerous scandals, war crimes, and tax frauds associated with the East India Company and the South Sea Company. Works of fiction such as Charles Dickens's Martin Chuzzlewit (1833) and Anthony Trollope's The Way We Live Now (1875) criticising the deceptive and fraudulent practices of businesses during the Railway Mania period (Rath, 2016) reflected this sentiment.

A significant moment in the evolution of this debate is the passage of the Sherman Antitrust Act in the United States in 1890, which aimed to prevent monopolies and limit the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few large companies. The act resulted in the dissolution of Standard Oil, which controlled a vast majority of the oil industry in America (Desjardins, 2017). The impact of World War I and II greatly affected public perception of corporations. During the wars, industrial giants were transformed into patriotic heroes and essential components of the Allied war effort, stifling scepticism about their activities. After World War II, there was a growing reaction against the authoritarian regimes that had caused destruction and suffering for decades. The state became a frequent antagonist in works of fiction. George Orwell's 1984 (1949), Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 (1953) and Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged (1957) are some of the most famous works that portray oppressive and manipulative states.

Growing criticism of private corporations emerged again in the 1960s, as intellectuals warned of their increasing influence and power. Works such as William Whyte's The Organization Man (1965) and Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1955) reflected this sentiment, highlighting the conformity and lack of individualism encouraged by corporate culture (Allan, 2015). Ian Fleming's Operation Thunder (1961) depicts a criminal organisation, SPECTRE, organised along corporate lines and driven solely by profit. The 80s marked a significant shift in the relationship between private companies and the state. This era saw a push towards deregulation and privatisation, emphasising free market ideals, individual freedom, and limited government intervention. One of the leading proponents of this thinking was the economist Milton Friedman (1970), who famously argued:

> "There is one and only one social responsibility of business — to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception fraud".

This worldview has profoundly impacted popular culture, particularly in science fiction. Films like Soylent Green (1973) and the Alien franchise depict corporations as faceless, heartless entities prioritising profits over people. In these movies, corporate interests often result in dystopian futures where the Earth is overpopulated, overheated, and undernourished and where a few control resources. Even in children's animated films like WALL•E (2008), we see the theme of unbounded corporate greed causing catastrophes. In the movie, Buy n Large controls all business sectors and infiltrates the political system (Fig. 1), making Earth uninhabitable.

Figure 1. A scene from WALL•E: inside the spaceship Axiom, passengers are overwhelmed by Buy n Large advertisements. Source: WALL•E by Pixar Animation Studios.

This depiction of corporations as villains has become so common that it is now a cliche, but not so far from reality. Real-world examples like the Enron scandal and the 2008 financial crisis caused by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers have further exacerbated the public's mistrust of big business. The rise of IT companies and their unhindered access to consumer data in the digital age has only heightened these concerns. Television shows like Black Mirror (2011) take this concept to its extreme, depicting a near future in which companies prioritise profits over ethics and morality, resulting in a chaotic society.

3   Cinema and the graphic designer

The history of graphic design in the film industry can be traced back to the early 20th century when films were silent, and intertitles were used to provide additional information to the viewer. The first instance of using intertitles has yet to be discovered with absolute certainty: the film usually cited is Uncle Tom's Cabin, directed by Edwin S. Porter for Edison in 1903 (Boschi, 2003). D.W. Griffith pioneered intertitles to establish narrative continuity in his films, using different fonts, backgrounds, and visual compositions to distinguish between opening credits, dialogue, and narration.

The introduction of sound in the mid-1930s changed the language of film and the relationship between films and viewers. Expository intertitles continued to be used, but their function became more selective and creative. The European film industry dominated the international market before World War I, but the war destabilised it, and Hollywood saw this as an opportunity to establish its worldwide hegemony. The Hollywood system controlled all aspects of the film industry, including production and distribution, and gave rise to its Golden Age. European film movements, such as German expressionism, Italian neorealism, and the French nouvelle-vague, challenged the dominance of Hollywood. However, in the United States, an important milestone was reached regarding the role

of design and designers in cinema. William Cameron Menzies (Fig. 2) was awarded the title of production designer for his work on Gone with the Wind, which expanded the function of the art director beyond the creation of sets and scenery to include the responsibility for visualising a motion picture (LoBrutto, 2002).
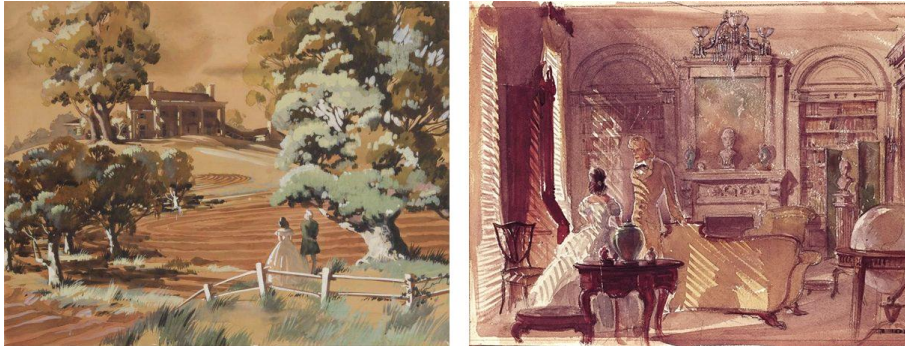

Figure 2. Menzies' concept art for Gone with the Wind. Source: Time Magazine.

The work of Saul Bass, a pioneering graphic designer, revolutionised the creative potential of opening credits. Before Bass, opening credits served a purely functional purpose, introducing the title and cast without any connection to the story. Bass's contribution was to create a "film within a film," in which the opening credits set the mood and introduced the film through visual metaphors in the form of simple animations (Haskin & Bass, 1996). He used simple geometric shapes and typography to represent complex narratives. His minimalist, modernist approach made many of his creations iconic in film and design history.

> "Saul said that a film symbol is like a company logo but with a shorter life to do its work. A film symbol still had to attract, and like a record cover or book cover, had to nonverbally express the essence of the movie [...]." (Petit, 2014)

Bass's legacy has profoundly impacted modern and contemporary cinema, influencing many title designers and giving visibility to graphic design in films.

The period between the end of the 60s and early 80s, commonly referred to as New Hollywood, saw the rise of a new generation of filmmakers who grew up watching television and foreign cinema. Stories and plots became more sophisticated and careful in their depiction of reality. Part of this change also came from the growing phenomenon of "blockbusters", high-budget, highly profitable films that were the first to employ digital special effects. This technological evolution, from traditional optical and physical-mechanical special effects to computer-generated graphic processing, was destined to mark a turning point in film history. Hollywood was gradually establishing a new kind of cinematic aesthetic through increasing control of all aspects of the image.

The digital revolution made it possible to incorporate the computer into filmmaking as the main tool for editing and manipulating images. The role of the graphic designer within a film production was recognised in the United States by the United Scenic Artist Union in the late 1980s, ensuring for the first time the certainty of being mentioned in the production credits. The presence of at least one graphic designer among the members of a production has become essential today, thanks in part to the increasingly strict enforcement of copyright laws in the entertainment industry (Atkins, 2020) (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Banknotes and police report of the fictional nation of Zubrowka, designed by Annie Atkins for the film Grand Budapest Hotel. Source: Atkins, 2020.

4 Building narrative worlds

The presence of a brand identity within a story does not simply require a story. A logo, a sign, or a poster often creates in the viewer the perception of something broader beyond what the main story is telling them. The inclusion of companies and institutions with their coordinated images alludes to a society, to an imaginary world, which, although different from the one we know, reflects it in many ways. Analysing the most common ways and approaches to creating imaginary worlds is useful.

World-building concerns the practices and concepts that underlie the creation of alternative realities within media texts. Environmental storytelling refers to the techniques and principles in video game works that allow designers to turn the game world into an indirect narrative tool. Finally, transmedia storytelling focuses on the possibilities and narrative implications that contamination and expansion across multiple media can bring to a work of fiction.

4.1 World-building

The world-building concept in media studies refers to creating and developing detailed and coherent fictional worlds within narrative media texts, such as films, video games, or novels. This process involves the creation of a fictional setting rich in culture, history, and geography, often including its own rules, laws, and technologies. Wolf (2012) traces the practice back to Homer's Odyssey, where the islands visited by Ulysses during his travels constitute one of the first fictional narrative worlds in history. Before this subject became of interest in academia, authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis had already discussed and theorised about creating fictional worlds. Tolkien used the term "subcreation" to refer to this process. The prefix "sub" differentiates it from divine creation, which originates from nothing and on which everything else depends.

Murray (2017), examining the creation of imaginary worlds in the 1990s, noted how the advent of new media encourages new approaches and new kinds of nonlinear narratives. He envisioned a new "hyperserial" format integrating a digital archive, such as a website, with a broadcast television program. Manovich (2002), introducing the concept of the "database narrative", argues that the

creation of a work in new media can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database, and the user of a narrative traverses a database, following the links between its records established by the database creator. Both Murray and Manovich conceive multimedia works as generative spaces where the user can explore various and different narrative aspects that will compose a complete image of the imaginary world. Jenkins (2008) believes storytelling has become the art of world-building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium. The world is bigger than the film and even the franchise, as fan speculation and elaboration expand it in various directions. Jenkins argues that a world can exist without a story, but a story cannot exist without a world.

4.2   Environmental storytelling

In video games, this technique has become increasingly important. This level design approach deals with creating game environments that can tell a story to the player passing through them without relying on direct exposition like character dialogues or cutscenes. Instead, the story is conveyed through the elements that characterise and populate the scenario.

Fernández-Vara (2012) points out that, in many cases, environmental storytelling operates through indices, a concept found in Peirce's semiotic theory indicating signs physically connected to the idea they want to communicate. In environmental storytelling, designers use indexes to communicate information about the game world to the player. While it may seem natural to associate environmental design with set dressing and design in the film industry, this connection must be more accurate. Films control and direct the viewer's gaze through framing and editing, while video games give players control over their view and movement within the game space. This fundamental difference means that environmental storytelling requires different strategies and design paths from those used in the film industry. Environmental storytelling actively involves the player in the story-building process as they put together clues, traces, and information dispersed by the designers within the environments. Players reconstruct a story through fragments in an active process that depends largely on their willingness to explore and make sense of what surrounds them.

The environmental narrative is often conceived as a parallel or tangential narrative that does not contribute fundamentally to understanding the main story but allows players to discover additional aspects of the game world. However, some games use environmental storytelling to tell rich, multifaceted stories without resorting to interlude scenes. In these games, exploration of the environment becomes an essential narrative device.

Two games that have contributed significantly to the development of environmental storytelling are Bioshock and Portal. In Bioshock, players are thrown into Rapture, a ruined underwater city where time seems to stand still. The environment takes on the role of introducing players to the game world, as there are no introductory dialogues or direct exposition. All the spaces, rooms, and squares are meticulously detailed and populated with neon signs, billboards, and statues that immerse players in the city's story. The Art Deco-style architecture and furnishings, as well as celebratory posters bearing phrases from the founder, reveal that the city was built by an industrial magnate who wanted to build a utopia isolated from the world and dedicated to celebrating human ingenuity and resourcefulness. The decay and neglect the city has fallen into are evident through decorations, streamers, and balloons, indicating that something went wrong on New Year's Eve 1959 (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. The explorable environment in Bioshock. Source: Bioshock by 2K Games.

Portal is a puzzle game emphasising environmental storytelling to contextualise the player's actions. The game's simple structure involves using a gun to generate interconnected portals and traversing obstacle-filled rooms. The player's participation in scientific tests using the Portal Gun provides the narrative context justifying these actions. The game's use of environmental storytelling is expanded in Portal 2, which explores the history of Aperture Science, the company behind the Portal Gun and the test facilities. The game uses signs, information boards, posters, and newspapers to reconstruct the company's history, from its beginnings as a shower curtain factory to its collaboration with the US government in unconventional weapons research (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Information poster dating back to the 1950s in the underground laboratories of the Aperture Enrichment Centre (Portal 2). Source: Portal 2 by Valve Software.

4.3 Transmedia storytelling

Transmedia storytelling has become a popular topic of discussion in the research world over the past two decades. The concept was first introduced by Jenkins (2007), who defined it as a story that unfolds across multiple media platforms. Each new text makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. A story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored through gameplay or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained, so the user does not need to have seen the movie to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is an entry point into the franchise (Jenkins, 2008). Jenkins cites the Matrix franchise as an excellent example of the use of transmedia storytelling. Key information is conveyed through three action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of

comic book stories, and several video games. As a result, no single source or reference text can provide all the information necessary for a complete understanding of the Matrix universe (Jenkins, 2008). Jenkins also agrees that transmedia storytelling reflects the economics of media consolidation around the concept of "synergy." Modern media companies are horizontally integrated, holding interests across a range of what were once distinct media industries. A media conglomerate is incentivised to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many media platforms as possible.

Scolari (2009) proposes a parallelism between the concept of transmedia storytelling and the practice of branding. Just as designers create numerous touchpoints that serve as possible entry points for the customer into the world of the brand, so do production companies trying to create numerous media hubs for their intellectual property. The current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative. Bordwell (2006) notes the growing popularity of world-building dynamics in recent years. More and more films have been at pains to offer a rich, textured sense of the world the story inhabits. Bordwell believes this trend is related to the rise of franchises and the desire to create worlds that can sustain multiple stories across multiple media.

Expanding a narrative world in a transmedia way can serve several functions. It can deepen certain characters' personalities, investigate the world in which the story is set, or serve as a bridge between the events of a work and its sequel. Addressing the topic of expanding a narrative world, Scolari (2009) identifies four possible strategies that can be used to broaden the horizons of the original narrative and transpose it into other media: interstitial micro-stories, parallel stories, peripheral stories, and user-generated content platforms. Ideally, each narrative contribution should be accessible and enjoyable as a stand-alone element while uniquely contributing to the narrative apparatus.

5   Fictional branding practices

It is possible to affirm that fictional brands assume behaviours and strategies like existing brands. Sometimes, they become real brands, switching from the pure fictional context to the real one. In audiovisual productions, it is also possible to see and recognise real brands, as it is for brand placements and proto-brands, fictional brands within a narrative (Muzellec et al., 2012). These proto-brands can also be subject to a redesign process: an evolution of the brand identity within the narrative. Another interesting category is the one of recurring brands: brands that occasionally recur because of the movie production industry's organisation (Fig. 6).
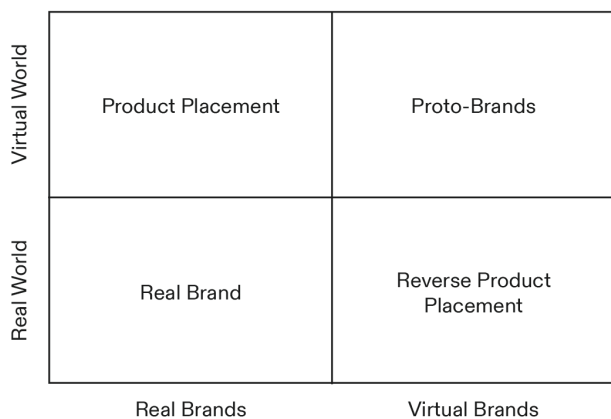
	Real Brands	Virtual Brands
Virtual World	Product Placement	Proto-Brands
Real World	Real Brand	Reverse Product Placement

Figure 6. Brand typologies in real and fictitious contexts. Source: Muzellec et al., 2012.

8

5.1 Brand placement

Whenever a real brand appears in entertainment products, specifically in film, TV series, and video games, there are two possible scenarios: product placement and creative choice. In a product placement setting, a company pays for its brand to appear within the work, and agreements between the company and the production regulate how the product or brand image appears. Often, in the case of film products, a series of rules are established regarding screen time, ways of filming and representing a product, and relationships with the actors on stage. On the other hand, there are cases of a brand included by creative choice to provide authenticity and credibility to the narrative world. In both circumstances, the use of a brand is subject to compliance with specific rules that can limit expressive possibilities. Apple, while often granting the use of its products in films and television series, places as a stipulation that they cannot be used or associated with antagonistic or hostile characters within the story (Vanity Fair, 2020). These constraints are often why filmmakers opt to create fictitious brands, avoiding agreements and ensuring complete creative freedom.

5.2 Redesign

Visual identity redesign is a necessary process that every company or institution goes through at some point in its lifespan. Whether big or small, this process has an impact on the coordinated identity of the brand. The reasons for a visual identity redesign can vary, from keeping updated in style and visual language, to remaining competitive in a constantly evolving market, or to responding to a contextual crisis, redefining values, or pointing in new business directions (Carmi, 2020, p. 263; Grizzanti, 2020, pp. 120-124).

Regarding brand redesign within stories, two scenarios can be distinguished: redesign within and outside the narrative. In the first case, redesign assumes relevance within the narrative and becomes a real narrative tool. For instance, in the television series Mad Men (2007-2015), the redesign of the Sterling Cooper and Partners' logo is a clue to the evolution and change within the story (Fig. 7). This change reflects the agency's merger with another consulting firm and rebranding to become a new entity. The new identity is unveiled through a press release by the AMC television network, which perfectly traces the format and methods of the era in which the series is set. In this case, redesigning the logo and its various applications adds depth to the story and can highlight narrative developments.

Figure 7. Old (left) and new (right) Sterling Cooper logo in Mad Men. Sources: Brands of the World (left), Business Insider (right).

Beyond the case of Mad Men, there are other examples of redesigns that act more subtly, not being at the centre of any overt and fundamental narrative turn but simply enriching the context and the world in which the story is set. For instance, in the film Grand Budapest Hotel (2014), the hotel's story is told through 30 years, from 1932 to 1968 (Fig. 8). One of the elements that help the viewer to

understand and metabolise this flash-forward is the hotel's new signage, which changes from an intricate art nouveau style to the use of geometric sans-serif lettering.

Fig. 8. Screenshots from the movie Grand Budapest Hotel showing the logos changes. Source: screenshots by the authors.

Another case of interest is the one of Ablixa (Fig. 9), a pharma brand in Side Effects (2013), directed by Steven Soderbergh. Ablixa plays a key role in the film's plot. For this, the authors asked Emily Oberman, partner of Pentagram New York, to create an extremely realistic and plausible brand identity, complete with rebranding during the narration (Pentagram, n.d.).

Figure 9. Albixa logos. Source: Pentagram.

In the second scenario, redesign outside the narrative finds its reasons solely due to a change in the artistic direction of the audiovisual product. This type of redesign is common in the case of remake or reboot operations. Authors and producers believe, in these cases, that the product can become more appealing to the audience by updating the visual elements, including graphics artefacts. The new brand image is not connected in any way, narratively speaking, to that of the original work. Nonetheless, it is common to maintain some connection to the original design to avoid confusion among longtime viewers in terms of visual language. These are the cases of the computer company Encom featured in Tron (1982 and 2010), the noble House of Atreides in Dune (1984 and 2021), and the candy brand Wonka Candy Company (1971 and 2005).

5.3   Recurring fictional brands

Many examples of fictional brands have transcended their original narratives and appeared across multiple works that are not connected in any way. These fictional brands can be divided into two groups: those created by a particular author and those created by prop houses.

The first group of fictional brands is linked to a specific author and can be considered a signature or reference to the author's earlier works. For example, Red Apple Cigarettes is a fictional brand appearing in several of Quentin Tarantino's films (Fig. 10), including Pulp Fiction, Reservoir Dogs, Kill Bill, and Once Upon a Time in Hollywood. This brand is always depicted as popular and widely available in the world of Tarantino's films, serving as a parody of major cigarette brands. Other recurring fictional brands in Tarantino's films include Acuña Boys Tex-Mex Food, Big Kahuna Burger, G.O. Juice, K-Billy, Tenku Brand Beer, and Teriyaki Donut. These brands allow Tarantino to maintain complete

creative control in every scene of his films, avoiding having to submit to brand placement agreements (Haselbeck, n.d.).

Figure 10. The appearance of Red Apple Cigarettes on a billboard in Kill Bill: Volume 1. Source: authors, screenshot from the film.

The second group of fictional brands includes those created by prop houses. These companies offer advanced services for their clients, such as designing and creating custom graphics. Independent Studio Services (ISS) (Fig. 11) is one of the most renowned prop houses in the United States. Its graphic department created many fictional brands used in hundreds of productions worldwide, including Heisler beer, Let's potato chips and Glencallan whiskey. One of the oldest recurring fictional brands is Morley cigarettes, created by Earl Hays Press for Alfred Hitchcock's film Psycho in 1960 (MeTV, 2016). It became the most widely used fictional brand in film history (Snyder, 2021). Its popularity grew particularly following the X-Files series, where one of the main antagonists is an avid Morley cigarette smoker.

Figure 11. Series of fictitious beverage brands available in the ISS catalogue. Source: issprops.com.

Productions often use fictional brands when the brand must necessarily be associated with an adverse event or behaviour. Oceanic Airlines is one of the most famous fictional brands originating from this reason, first seen in the Flipper series in 1965. This brand has become popular and used in numerous productions, including Lost, 24, and Fringe.

6 Outside the fiction

A fictional brand within an audiovisual product can be extremely useful when approaching a marketing campaign or, more generally, to apply an appropriate communication strategy aimed at stimulating awareness and recognition by the audience. Precisely because of the intrinsic characteristics that make it much more concrete than other narrative aspects, a fictional brand lends itself very well to appear on billboards, objects, and clothing. A fictional brand can generate interest and curiosity about the work and its world through effective collaboration between the marketing departments and the original authors to maintain narrative consistency and avoid confusion.

6.1 Marketing campaigns

In recent years, marketing strategies for movies, TV series, and video games have shifted to actively engaging fictional brands in the narratives. These highly articulated operations integrate multiple touchpoints, from digital such as websites and apps, to billboards, installations, and even dedicated events. The campaigns leverage the communicative power of graphic design elements within the stories to create user engagement by bringing users into the narrative world. By exploring the parallel story of the fictional brand, users can expand their horizons and explore aspects of the brand that may not be explored in the original work. One of the most common options is to build an online presence by creating a website.

For example, the movie Okja (2017) created superpigproject.com to promote the latest product from the Mirando Corporation, a breeding company owned by the movie's main antagonist. The site advertises the Super Pig Project through a paradoxical aesthetic that evokes environmentalism while addressing anything but environmental issues. Initiatives outside digital channels are also gaining popularity. The advertising campaign for the third season of Better Call Saul (2017) focused on the fast-food chain Los Pollos Hermanos, owned by Gus Fring, a famous character from the original series. Pop-up stores were opened in various locations, serving fried chicken (for free) and largely adopting the coordinated identity seen in the series (Fig. 12).

Figure 12. Employees and mascot of the Los Pollos Hermanos pop-up store in Milan (2017). Source: Dude agency.

To promote the Homecoming (2018-2020) TV series was organised an event for the press and influencers. The event included a preview of some episodes and an experience simulating participation in the Homecoming narrative (in the series, it is a rehabilitation program for soldiers

returning from war zones) inside the Homecoming Transition Support Center. Participants explored numerous locations inspired by the series, with an evocative 70s aesthetic.

An example of a transmedia campaign that fully exploits the characteristics and potential of a fictional brand is the one that 20th Century Fox, together with the studio Ignition Interactive, carried out to promote Prometheus (2012), the first prequel film in the Alien film saga. The fictional company is the Weyland Corporation, a multinational corporation at the forefront of robotics and space exploration in the story's universe. The campaign was launched with the release of a video at the TED2012 conference of a fictitious talk by the Weyland Corporation's founder (played by Guy Pierce) at a TED talk set in 2023. At the end of the video, "the central narrative hub of the campaign" (Boes et al., 2014), the Weyland Corporation website, was introduced. The website was not directly related to the movie but appeared genuine, referring to the stereotyped large multinational corporation aesthetic. Everything was seamlessly integrated into the movie's narrative world, from the user interface to the contents. Information on a wide range of topics was available, including the company's history, financial reports, some of the planned space missions' details, and some products' specifications, such as the android David 8, which appears as one of the main characters in the movie. The latter section could be unlocked by entering specific codes released through the company's social media.

6.2   Defictionalisation

Defictionalisation, also known as reverse product placement (Muzellec et al., 2012) (Fig. 6), is the process of transforming a fictitious brand into a real one that exists outside of the fiction that originated it. The success of defictionalisation can transform the emotional value attached to a fictitious brand (proto-brand) into actual economic value. Proto-brands are those not available in the real market that, while not yet having economic value, capture the imagination and elicit an emotional attachment from consumers. Defictionalisation allows proto-brands to become successful real-world brands. Examples of successful defictionalisation include Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. (originally in the film Forrest Gump, 1994) and the Dunder Mifflin Paper brand from The Office TV series (2005-2013).

Muzellec et al. (2012) also note that it is necessary to distinguish defictionalisation from merchandising. Defictionalisation allows a fictional brand to take on an independence of its own, while merchandising relies on the correlation with the entertainment product that generated it. They also warn that the value of a proto-brand can be easily exploited by third-party entities if not carefully protected in legal terms. The case of Duff Beer from The Simpsons is an example of this, where a Mexican entrepreneur managed to register the trademark and licence production of a beer branded Duff Beer without the owners of The Simpsons benefiting in any way.

6.3   Grassroots initiatives

In today's entertainment industry, cultivating a community of loyal fans has become increasingly important for large companies. This implies developing strategies to engage fans as much as possible, bringing them together via online channels, mainly social networks. Merchandise can also be a significant revenue opportunity, particularly in the presence of a loyal audience that wants to own something related to the audiovisual product. A fictional brand within the narrative can facilitate this process, as it can be an extremely versatile means of attracting the interest of film, series, or video game fans. A logo and a coordinated brand identity that refers to a given audiovisual product allows generating numerous content and applications, imitating the practices found in real branding projects. However, not all production houses take advantage of this possibility, even when well-crafted fictional

brands within their work generate interest and fondness among a large part of the audience. There can be many reasons for this, such as feeling that the production effort would not generate enough revenue to sustain it or simply not having any interest in undertaking this type of activity.

Sometimes, grassroots phenomena develop to fill this void because of a community of users interested in additional content and products. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, made possible by the spread of accessible services and platforms that allow people to showcase and sell their creations. Online platforms (e.g., Redbubble or Etsy) have established themselves as virtual stores where people can find any kind of unofficial gadgets or merchandise (T-shirts, stickers, caps, …) related to movies, TV series, and video games.

In the category of grassroots initiatives, it is necessary to include more than the production and selling of unofficial merchandise related to a fictional brand. There are cases of people who have independently developed websites related to a specific fictional brand. One such case is waystarroycompany.com, which takes the form of the corporate website of Waystar Royco, the conglomerate at the centre of the events of the Succession series (2018), which operates in information and entertainment. Another one is lumon.industries, which serves as the corporate portal of the Lumon company that appears in Severance (2022).

7 The online archive, future developments, and some conclusions

The various issues described refer to many cases collected in the online archive, representing the main output of the presented research (Figg. 13, 14). More than 100 case studies of fictional brands have been organised according to 5 main categories: Sector (the statute of the organisation: private, political, military, …); Category (the scope of the organisation); Medium (if it is within animated or live-action films, TV series or video games); Genre (according to the Internet Movie Database – IMDb); Touchpoints (i.e. which applications were observed or detected). Each fictional brand is described in detail in individual tabs organised as follows:

- A summary with the logo and basic information (available on the archive home page too). If existing, it is also possible to scroll through the various logos of the fictional brand, whether they are the result of rebrands that took place for narrative reasons or external to the narrative.
- In the second column, it is possible to find both general information (Description) and a history of the fictional brand in the narrative world (Fictional History).
- The third column presents the fictional brand's identity through a series of examples relating to touchpoints, categorised according to Wheeler (2017).

Two social channels (Instagram and TikTok) have been opened to promote the Archive and engage the community to expand the database. A possible future development concerns the completeness of the Archive: this is a desirable goal that could also be achieved thanks to the involvement of users, given the number of films, TV series, and video games still to be analysed. In the same way, the database could be extended to the world of comics, which is currently excluded from analysis and research. The aim is to complete the records already included and to collect new ones related to the world of comics and the possible transmedia storytelling derived from comic narratives.

Figure 13. The homepage of Fictional Brands Archive. Source: authors (2023).

Figure 14. Details page of a fictional brand on Fictional Brands Archive. Source: authors (2023).

We have highlighted with this contribution how fictional brands can play a fundamental role in constructing engaging, credible, and memorable narrative worlds within audiovisual narrative works. Fictional brands need a visual set and a consistent and effective brand identity for narrative purposes. They need logos and touchpoints designed in a detailed, appropriate, and consistent way, according to the narrative context. The visual dimension must be represented appropriately, whether it is historical periods, industrial or professional sectors, products useful for stories or character development. For this reason, it is important to underline how the visual entertainment industry has become a professional opportunity for graphic and visual communication designers. After all, and they are not the only ones, the cases of Emily Oberman or Angelica Borrero and Tansy Michaud, art directors and graphic designers involved in the production of the TV series Severance (Bernini, 2023), also demonstrate this opportunity.

Furthermore, this study and its Archive can represent helpful teaching aids in communication design degree courses: very frequently, fictitious subjects are adopted in design studios to develop visual identities and communication strategies students have to design.

Finally, as already mentioned, it is hoped that this is only a starting point for further research on this topic and a guide for all who intend to use fictional brands effectively to create engaging works and narrative worlds.

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