

BOOK REVIEW

Franchises: Now More than Ever!

James Fleury, Bryan Hikari Hartzheim, Stephen Mamber, eds. *The Franchise Era: Managing Media in the Digital Economy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. pp. 336. £80.00 (hardback). ISBN 9781474419222.

In April 2019, Walt Disney World released a promotional video for its Orlando outposts—Epcot, Hollywood Studios, the Animal Kingdom, the Magic Kingdom—starring an array of digital influencers (@aprilorgill, @beleafmel, @theohoanaadventure, @theluckyfellowofficial) invited to ‘capture the magic’ at the ‘Happiest Place on Earth’ (‘Now More Than Ever’). The video features scenes of said influencers smiling on rides like the Magic Carpets of Aladdin and Slinky Dog Dash; immersed in a virtually realized version of *Avatar*’s Pandora; rocking out to *Guardians of the Galaxy* — *Awesome Mix Live!*, with a miniature Star-Lord waving alongside an onstage counterpart; literally kicking it with the Incredibles; marching in the Festival of Fantasy parade; and playing instruments with actors in the Festival of the Lion King stage show, all before the promo lands on its culminating tagline/hashtag: NOW MORE THAN EVER/#NowMoreThanEver. What’s ‘More’ now? More properties, more copyrights underlining the bottom of the promo’s final frame: Disney, Disney/Pixar, PLOOF-Slinky, Hasbro, Marvel, Fox; more worlds, and more immersion in those worlds through virtual reality (VR) and interactive live-action shows; and more digital influence, from couples and families themselves franchised in @s that always point to more—YouTube channels, social media feeds, websites, etc.

If this video delivers a sunny postcard of both the franchise era and the digital economy from which James Fleury, Bryan Hikari Hartzheim, and Stephen Mamber’s new edited collection takes its title and subtitle, then the promo also serves as a summons for the study of that era and economy. Fleury, Hartzheim, and Mamber dwell in the ‘Now’, offering one of the most comprehensive and suggestive vistas yet of franchises’ contemporary sprawl. The thirteen chapters therein emphasize the corporate and corporeal aspects of franchises implied by the promo—that is, they either focus on the body politic of a specific franchise (Alien, Disneyland, Critters, Ghost in the Shell, How to Train Your Dragon, Nintendo, Star Wars) and/or else the bodily politics of interactive and immersive digital media tied to franchises, like apps, streaming platforms, video games, and VR. The editors outline and align these two ongoing concerns in their splendid, eminently assignable introduction, an appraisal of the franchise landscape staked upon a series of binaries: big-budget/mid-budget, character/star, universe/tent-pole, television/film, global/domestic, Big Tech/Big Six (Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Netflix). Accordingly, the volume addresses ‘how traditional incumbents, such as film studios and television networks, have responded to the rise of big data companies’; ‘the ways in which legacy franchises are adapting to new media platforms and technologies’; ‘the significant historical continuities and deviations

in franchise-making and how they shape the representation of on-screen texts across digital displays'; and 'how emerging media formats are expanding the possibilities for transmedia experiences' (2). As these qualifiers imply, most of the volume's writers are indebted to the media industrial studiosness of Derek Johnson's *Media Franchising: Creative Licenses and Collaboration*, whose MO Johnson himself summarizes in his forward to *The Franchise Era*: 'this book joins a host of exciting works in critical media studies that reveal the managerial efforts of creators, executives, and other collaborative partners as a vital and contested site of meaning, identity, and struggle in their own right' (xv).

Fleury, Hartzheim, and Mamber's book also joins a small host of works in adaptation studies that reveal the specifically *adaptational* efforts of creators, executives, and other collaborative partners in media franchises, works that include Clare Parody's breakthrough 2011 essay on 'Franchising/Adaptation' and my history of *Adaptations in the Franchise Era: 2001-16*, many of whose subjects—streaming television, esports, video games, mobile games, and theme parks—play starring roles here. Plenty gets *adapted* and plenty *adapts to* in *The Franchise Era* and the franchise era, even if actual cameos from adaptation theory are fleeting: only Linda Hutcheon makes a brief appearance in Andreas Rauscher's chapter on 'cineludic form', which posits that 'different story blocks' from Star Wars 'can create a structure similar to a theme park or an adventure playground that represents not a single linear narrative but several set pieces from a franchise that can be visited as self-contained places' (123). In Rauscher's chapter alone, Star Wars games 'adapt the setting of the galaxy far, far away to the demands of different game genres' and '[p]layers adapt [...] simple narrative moves into turns' (126). Elsewhere, Fleury, Hartzheim, and Mamber define franchising as 'a multimedia management strategy in which texts adapt shared material' (1); Heather Lee Birdsall speculates that the Xbox game *Kinect Disneyland Adventures* 'adapt[s] the embodied experience of the physical park' (90); Jennifer Gillan looks at how 'broadcast content has adapted to the challenges and opportunities of the convergent media industries' (183); Hartzheim argues that mobile games possess 'the ability to adapt to accommodate changing fan interests and trends over time' (233); and for Alexander Champlin, 'the [esports] studio itself has to adapt the experience of watching for its audience' (269). These *adaptations of* experiences, franchises, films, and shared material—and these *adaptations to* changes, changing interests, challenges, and live action—not only align adaptation with the language and rhetoric of franchising, and with the movement of its content, but also with its business. Fleury, Hartzheim, and Mamber's collection offers adaptation scholars a methodology-in-action on which to capitalize: one less tethered to the often formal hairsplitting of convergence cultural and transmedial theory—long the endgame of franchise-minded adaptationists—and one more forcefully aligned with Simone Murray's forays into the adaptation industry, or at least one sector thereof; indeed, Murray's specific focus on *literary* adaptation leaves plenty of room for scholars to interrogate adaptation's partnerships in the franchise industry.

'[T]he managerial efforts of creators, executives, and other collaborative partners'—in Johnson's words—make up the bulk of *The Franchise Era's* running time, with the collection's best entries often taking up less studied franchises (and less studied aspects of franchises) in exploring those efforts. Daniel Herbert, for one—and one of the few scholars besides Johnson who has tackled franchises in a single-authored monograph

(*Film Remakes and Franchises*, 2017)—brilliantly positions New Line’s Critters as ‘a privileged case for understanding media franchising from the industrial and cultural “margins”’ (53). Herbert suggests that ‘the textual recycling typical of marginal, independent film companies, which often traded in exploitation or horror movies, anticipated and had an impact on the franchising practices of the larger, mainstream Hollywood industry’ (53)—an appealing invitation to approach franchises not from the top of the box office but from the bottom of the bargain bin. Rayna Denison’s soaring chapter on DreamWorks Animation’s *How to Train Your Dragon* is similarly expansive, taking off from the grounds that ‘there has been little focus on the roles that animation plays within franchising worlds’ (158). Denison tracks *How to Train Your Dragon*’s flight from book to film to Nickelodeon to Netflix, noting how ‘this particular franchise has been shaped by its distributive technologies and by the partnerships forged by its studio’ along the way, with ‘the reuse of CG animation designs’ playing a central role in that shaping (175–76). In a closing every bit as inviting as Herbert’s, she avers that ‘[a]nimation now rests at the heart of Hollywood franchising and needs to be seen as the engine driving some of the most profitable and creatively experimental kinds of studio production’ (176); scholars would do well to follow Denison’s pilot effort.

While Herbert and Denison respectively gesture to residual and dominant management strategies driving contemporary franchises, other authors in the collection swerve towards the more emergent efforts employed by studios and conglomerates in stewarding their content through the digital economy alluded to in the book’s subtitle (a digital economy conspicuously absented of digital producers like the aforementioned influencers, or fan fiction writers, or vidders). Jennifer Gillan contrasts the ‘content-as-promotion strategies connected to *Black-ish* and other sitcoms across the Disney-ABC Television group’ with ‘those connected to *Parks and Recreation*’, a show that belonged both to NBCUniversal’s upstart comedy streaming platform Seeso and to Comcast’s and Netflix’s more general on-demand catalogues (183). She helpfully distinguishes between Disney’s ‘precise clustering’ of content—by having, for instance, characters from *Black-ish* explicitly discuss the Disney/Marvel property *Black Panther*—and Comcast’s/Netflix’s ‘loose clustering’, which situated *Parks and Rec* alongside affiliated comedic fare like STARZ’s *Party Down* and Netflix’s *Master of None* (183). Monica Sandler’s subsequent chapter returns to Seeso, contrasting that defunct venture with CBS’s online platform All Access, to ask how traditional broadcast networks use streaming video on demand (SVOD) ‘to brand themselves as a type of franchise’ (221) through similarly affiliative strategies. Matthew Thomas Payne’s earlier chapter on Nintendo, meanwhile, lays out a fascinating case for how the company’s management of its ‘Classics’ catalogue through both the online Virtual Console and offline NES/SNES Classic Editions (miniature, plug-and-play versions of those seminal consoles) are ‘communications management tool[s] first’ and ‘retro gaming device[s] second’ (107). For Payne, the Classics represent ‘an ad hoc means of ensuring brand legacy across eras, platforms, and titles’ (107). Payne, for his part, does make brief mention of digitally enabled modders who have hacked the consoles ‘to insert complete libraries and other features’ (110).

A final, particularly intriguing set of essays gesture more directly to users and audiences to suggest what current and future scholars of the franchise era—adaptationists included—may yet have to manage themselves. These essays deftly blend corporate

and corporeal interests—that is, interest in the bodies of franchise affiliation with an interest in the bodies (literal and metaphorical) of consumers who affiliate themselves with franchises. Co-editor Bryan Hikari Hartzheim turns to the mobile game ‘as a key paratext within the transmedia franchise’, positing that such paratexts ‘offer deeper, more sustainable experiences that more closely integrate with their host franchise’ than traditionally licensed console games (234). He writes that mobile games are not ‘additive’ (‘in the sense of providing any new information to those who have experienced [the franchise]’) but rather ‘designed around advertising and augmenting the most pleasurable affective aspects of the franchise to those both new and old to it’, effecting an ‘affective *franchise* amplification’ (243–44). Alexander Champlin’s look at the rise and franchising of esports, besides providing an accessible, essential introduction to the topic, considers how the ‘consolidation of audience, of franchises, of history, of place, and even of virtual worlds coalesces around the [esport] studio space’ (271), with esports giant Riot ‘producing sites that can begin to grow a practice of esports spectatorship that builds upon itself, that seeks to spawn franchises and durable sites of connection, all of which cyclically reinforce gameplay through spectatorship and competitive play’ (272). Fleury himself looks at an extreme and immersive form of spectatorship—VR, whose recent history with Hollywood Fleury traces in a tour-de-force chapter that finds him offering a useful taxonomy of immersive efforts along the way: ‘experiential’ (free, little user control), ‘consumer’ (paid, ‘video-game-like interactivity’), and ‘location-based’ (‘premium, social experiences’ limited by time and/or venue) (278).

His concluding chapter picks up several threads from one of the most compelling essays in the entire collection: Heather Lee Birdsall’s comprehensive, endlessly suggestive piece on ‘The Happiest Plays on Earth’, which finds its author visiting Disneyland as a ‘superfranchise’ that sits at the ‘convergent crossroads of physical theme parks, virtual video games, and media franchises’ (77–78). As Birdsall astutely notes, ‘For Disney, the origins of the theme park are inextricably linked to the idea of bridging gaps between media’, and her essay goes a long way in exploring how Disney’s desire to ‘recreate the embodied park experience, and to transmit it into our homes, pockets, and beyond reveals how the company uses digital technology to dissolve physical park boundaries’ (81). That is, Birdsall’s essay arrives squarely in the land of plenty, of more, where the borders between not only parks but also between media properties are quickly dissolving. Better than any other author in this very moreish volume, she articulates and explains the distinctly contemporary sense that, now more than ever, in the franchise era, we never really leave the park.

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