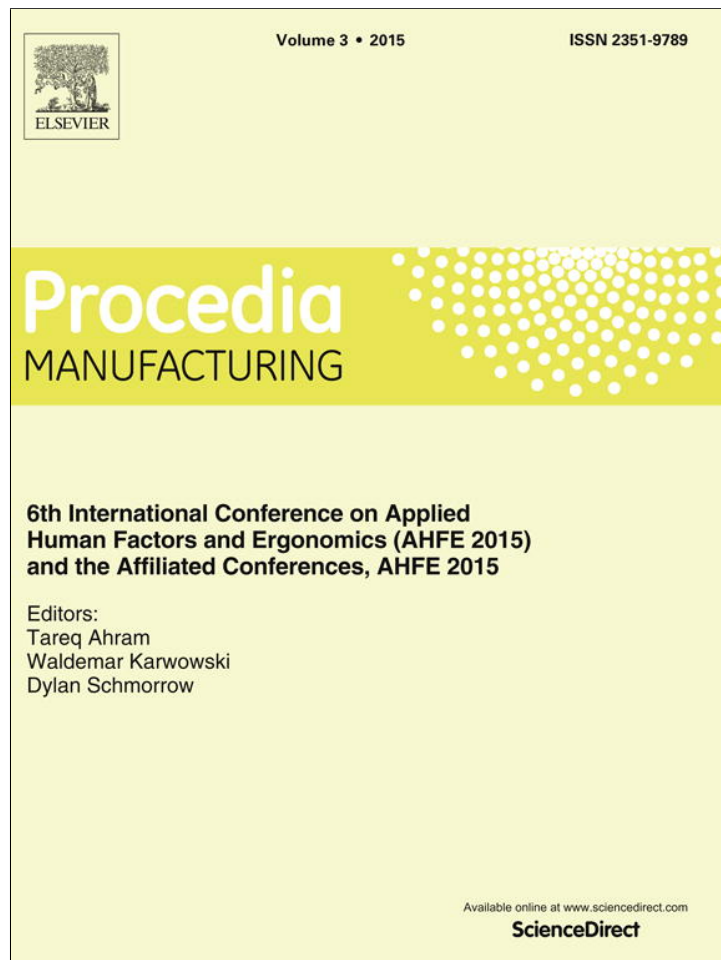


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## A system analysis of transmedia storytelling toys in relation to desire and pleasure

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### Abstract

Transmedia storytelling (TS) is a market and experience strategy where children learn to know a toy concept through multiple media platforms such as cartoons, films, games, and tangibles. Each type of media reveals information which in total makes a whole toy experience often perceived as dynamic and enjoyable [2]. As the story within the toy develops, new characters and objects emerge [2-6]. Thus, the children who are engaged with the toy will subsequently desire the character's novel weapons, vehicles, and costumes which are made available in the market by various channels such as computer games, board games, characters, tangibles, etc. This article explores such transmedia toys through an inquiry into the two systems based around Toy Story and Cars. The mapping of these systems involved visualizing play experiences, play platforms, occurrences of narrative extensions, and in turn the materializations that have emerged out of these extensions. The establishment and characteristics of relations between elements such as the above-mentioned factors and the playing children (and their network) who consume these toys make the first part of the analysis of the map. These interrelations are further analyzed in view of how such an experience system can influence children's experience of the transmedia toy and desire for new ones and, consequently, how they feel about the product. The construct for the analysis consists of establishing how the touch points that the system consists of compare with theory on product attachment and pleasure [7-9] and influence [10, 11], which again relates to the desire to purchase.

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## 1. Transmedia storytelling

Toys that involve children in a story are often the bestselling ones [1, 2].

The success achieved by presenting a toy connected to a narrative has led to a development strategy that starts with the creation of a narrative followed by the development of tangible toys [3]. Thus, the children and grownups are exposed to different facets of the toy by various media such as cartoons, films, books, games, and tangibles. The movie *Toy Story* is an example of such a process, in which the movie “actors” are in fact toys, which are, in turn, sold as real toys. The development of such toys that perform across multiple media platforms has led to the creation of *supersystems*, in which a toy merely makes one part of the whole concept [4].

The advertisement of toys has, in other words, shifted from the announcement of information on different media platforms to toys being a part of games, cartoons, the Internet, tangible objects, and movies. Each type of media represents different sets of challenges and ways to play and, therefore, often reveals different additive information about the narrative to form the whole plot [3, 5]. Marsha Kinder coined the term *transmedia intertextuality* to explain this division between the supplementary dimensions of a toy that enlarge the experience and the toy's market potential [4]. Henry Jenkins later uses the term *transmedia storytelling* [2, 6].

Transmedia differs from other marketing strategies as it “focuses on expanding the scope and meaning of a narrative” [3] as time goes on. Each part of the transmedia storytelling system is “often called a sub- or paratext or a media extension to a primary text” [5]. In transmedia storytelling, “all pieces of the story are equally vital to the story experience as a whole” [3].

Scolari proposed four strategies for expanding the narrative world within transmedia storytelling [3]:

*“Creation of interstitial microstories: These enrich the diegetic world by expanding the period between the seasons. The comics, online clips, video games and mobisodes are examples of this strategy. These texts have a close relationship with the macrostory”* [3, 7].

*“Creation of parallel stories: The mobisode 24: Conspiracy is the only example of this strategy in 24's diegetic world. The logic of this strategy is to create another story that unfolds at the same time as the macrostory. Parallel stories may evolve and transform into spin-offs”* [3, 7].

*“Creation of peripheral stories that can be considered more or less distant satellites of the macrostory, such as the 24 novels. These texts have a weak relationship to the macrostory, but even peripheral stories may evolve and transform into spin-offs”* [3, 7].

*“Creation of user-generated content platforms like blogs, wikis, etc. These environments should be considered an open-source story-creation machine that allows users to enrich the fictional world. However, the process of users creating new content based on mass media fictional characters — a phenomenon known as fan fiction — is usually outside the copyright owner's control”* [3, 7].

## 2. Method

To get insight into how transmedia storytelling works in the designing and marketing of toys, two mappings of such systems are presented, namely the system of the Disney film *Cars* mapped by Pietschmann [3] and the Pixar film *Toy Story* mapped by the author. Furthermore, two systems of transmedia storytelling were explored in light of desire and pleasure, by theory on autopoiesis and expectations, product attachment, and desire [8-16]. The two films and their transmedia storytelling platforms make the empirical data, which is mapped and visualized. The mappings were analyzed by classifying the toys' aspects of desirability [17, 18]. Such an aspect in this context can be understood as the *kind* of desire the transmedia toys elicit or motivate. The premises for classification are product attachment, expectations, and autopoiesis [9-14, 16]. And the “basis for classifications” [19] is how transmedia storytelling platforms influence children's desire for the pertaining transmedia toys. Finally, the empirical data is discussed up against theory on self-recursive systems [9-12, 16, 20], product attachment [14, 21-24], desire and enjoyment [8, 25, 26].

### 3. Experiencing transmedia storytelling

There is plenty of research on how one can design for transmedia storytelling [2, 3, 5-7]. The system of experience that transmedia storytelling creates and supports is considered to be a primary part of toy branding. As Scolari put it, “Economic subjects no longer try to sell a product or service by means of persuasive advertising. Now the objectives are much more ambitious; they aim to create a symbolic universe endowed with meaning” [7].

#### 3.1. Expectations

By 2007, 25 million of the *Toy Story* characters Buzz Lightyear and Woody had been purchased. Thus, the films and toys that have emerged out of these films have been a success. Playing with these toys serves as what Pietschmann calls “expanded backstory.” Thus, the toys serve to keep the children occupied within the space of experience presented by the film, games, etc. The expanded backstory further assists to build up the children’s expectations for how and with whom one might play, and certainly, for how the coming toys, games, and films will be.

Expectations engendered by expanded backstories are considered a context of strong influence [10, 11]. There are different typologies within expectations in this context. Firstly, there are expectations elicited by the creator of the transmedia toys who presents the coming extensions via films, games, and TV series. Secondly, you have the children’s expectations for the other children to have transmedia toys in order to play in groups. Typically, these expectations emerge when children meet to play, for example in the schoolyard. Here there might be a general expectancy within the group of that they all have the same toys and that they upgrade these along with the presented transmedia toy extensions. Thirdly, in such a form of play, where several kids have and play with toys from the same transmedia domain the children will have expectations on how the others play and act. The occurrence of such expectations emerge when play is rule based, and knowing the transmedia narrative by heart and having the characters to act is a situation analogous to game rules. Thus, the children will have knowledge of what is allowed to do and how to go beyond the rules and therefore expectations of own play. Furthermore, the children will have expectations of how the others will play and in extension expectations on how the other children expects you to play. This latter type of expectation compares to theory on self-recursive systems or autopoiesis, which is described as a “social system of interaction” [11].

Social systems of interactions serve to engender “continuing communication” [11] while playing. Continuing communication in this context can include expectations by the *others* of *your* play with the toys and vice versa. Thus, the play and communication continuity is highly influenced by expectations and “expectations of expectations” [11], as well by as the history of interactions and expectations. Accordingly, transmedia toys represent a complex, social, and attractive space for play [5, 11]. The possible experienced pleasure elicited by playing with transmedia toys serves as a good platform to create a symbolic universe that presents some meaning to children, which again serves to strengthen the expectations for the coming products.

#### 3.2. Desire

Private expectations elicited by expectations from others may elicit feelings of pleasure in another sense than the one stimulated by play and social interaction. Expectations by others that are considered important by an individual may also elicit feelings of pleasure. Such expectations could for example, involve a friend’s recognition of your comprehensive or rare collection of transmedia toys. Thus, the expectation serves as a *social proof* for behavior. Social proof is a psychological behavioral principle, which describes people’s tendency of looking to others in order to understand correct behavior [27]. Accordingly, the great scale of a transmedia storytelling system will inform children about what the correct purchase behavior and interest field is by the transmedia platform itself and via other children. Expectations are thus also taught. Even so, expectations often involve feelings of pleasure, especially if they involve planning of the coming purchase; the more time spent waiting and planning, the more the children will get attached to the product [13]. This acknowledged strategy to obtain feelings of product attachment does thus match with the marketing strategy of transmedia storytelling systems.

The planning process and the emerging expectations for the coming toy purchase are driven by desire. In a film featuring Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, Žižek emphasizes that one “never simply [have] the desire for a certain thing. It's always also the desire for desire itself [and] a desire to continue to desire” [8]. He further states that “melancholy is the loss for desire” [8]. Žižek mentions the Kinder Surprise Egg as an apt example of a toy that meets people's need for desire. Even though most people find the content, the yoke, or “the inestimable object of desire” or “the inner treasure” [8] often to represent a disappointing experience, they keep on buying them. Thus, the need for desire comes before the value or quality of the experience since “Kinder egg is about developing the surface and not the inner” [8]. Žižek termed what he describes as the inestimable object of desire *agalma*, a word that he has from by Plato and Lacan. Agalma, he says,

*are not the works of any given subjectivity ... their very structure has much to do with fantasy, the affects they generate (love, fascination, idealization, and the like) do not proceed from an auto affective process of the psyche. [8, 28]*

Accordingly, desire is not dependent on the effects that the desired product engenders. Žižek therefore suggests that “we should aim at the higher goal, the gold in the middle of an object, precisely to be able to enjoy the surface ... this is the metaphysical lesson which is difficult to accept” [8]. Furthermore, Žižek states that affective feelings does not emerge by auto affective processes. Accordingly if play is learned and its content easy to predict it will not “facilitate love, fascination, idealization, and the like” [8]. Huizinga proposed a similar idea, namely “as the opposite of aesthetics is not ugliness but apathy the opposite to play is not seriousness but the automatic” [29, 30]. Thus, automatic behavior according to Huizinga is not play.

### 3.2.1. Access to enjoyment

Any game can be a dreary to watch and even play. The massive publicity that media offers before for example a football world cup contributes to the buildup of expectations for thrilling events by football- and patriotic enthusiasts. Nevertheless, you will often see two nervous teams defending themselves for 90 minutes out of anxiety to loose which often leads to games without any scoring opportunities and 0-0 scores. Accordingly, the social prohibition of failure and the crowds expectation of a good game, leads to the lack of enjoyment for the spectator and perhaps player. However, an anxious attitude or any other attitude by the players do not always provide the desired results. This randomness enables boring and exiting matches as well as expected and surprising results. If watching five tiresome matches in a row a game with mediocre quality is more likely to be regarded as exciting due to the contrast of experience [27, 31, 32]. Accordingly, “direct injunction [to] ‘enjoy!’” is a much more effective way to hinder the subject's access to enjoyment than the explicit prohibition which sustains the space for its transgression” [26]. Hence, when access to the guaranteed enjoyment is not expected the probability to enjoy is greater.

This illustrates the opposite of a typical toy marketing strategy, which may portray play enabled by a toy that gives direct access to assured enjoyment. This situation may serve to dissatisfy the child when s/he has acquired the toy and experiences that the toy conceivably does not elicit the promised feelings.

## 4. Cars

Pietschmann performed a case study of Disney's film *Cars* to “show the possibilities and limitations of transmedia franchises for children” in order to evaluate their narrative strategies and their cognitive requirements [3]. In this study, they used Jenkins's seven principles of good transmedia storytelling: spreadability and drillability, immersion and extractability, world building, continuity and multiplicity, seriality, subjectivity, and performance or interaction. The mapping of *Cars* developed by Pietschmann shows that the transmedia franchise started out with a feature film “and expanded on that” [3] with a storybook, TV series, and websites, among other properties (see figure 1). According to this study, the TV series, video games, interactive websites, and theme parks served to expand the moment in time between the two feature films *Cars* and *Cars 2*, whereas *Cars* made the backstory extended by the first video game along with the storybook (see figure 1). Furthermore, the games are vitalized by the prompting of new releases of the same game on different play platforms.

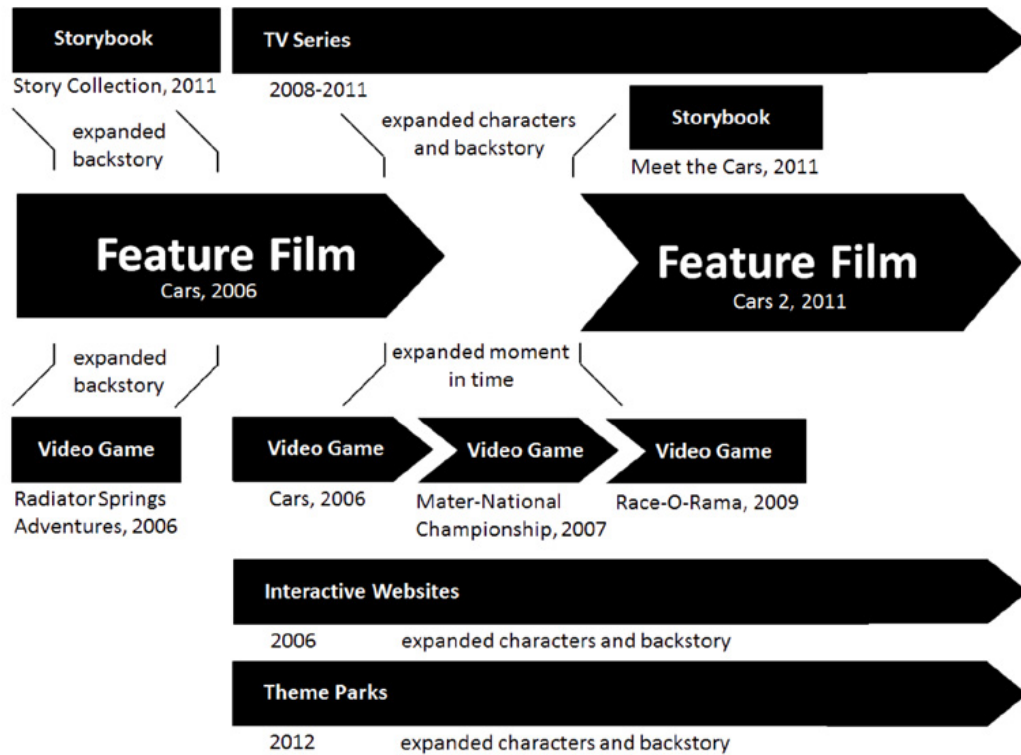


Fig. 1. Narrative extensions of the *Cars* transmedia franchise [3].

## 5. Toy Story

The *Toy Story* transmedia platform (see figure 2.) is more comprehensive than the one of *Cars* as it contains more entities in the form of films, games, toys, and theme parks. The three grey areas indicate the time span between films or backstories for the transmedia system, and the red arrows represent the buildup of expectations. The space between the film releases is thoroughly filled with activities of which perhaps the character toys and the games make the most influential parts. Each film introduces new characters and thereby character toys that are connected to the characters in the previous film versions by the narrative. The release of identical games on different platforms at different times expands the narrative extension even further.



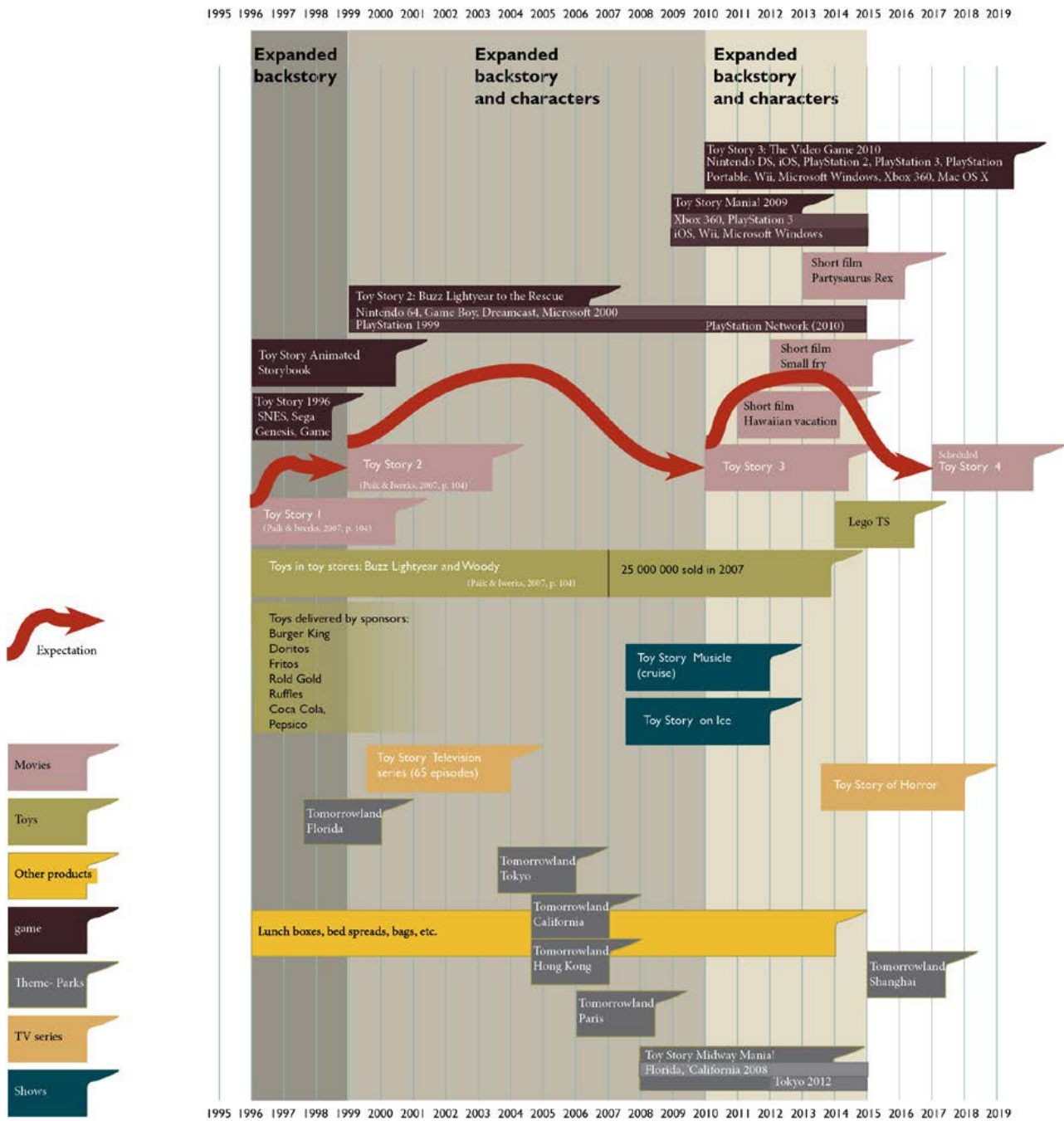


Fig. 2. Extensions of the *Toy Story* transmedia franchise, Tore Gulden 2015.

## 6. Discussion and concluding remarks

The mapping of the transmedia storytelling platforms that *Cars* and *Toy Story* builds upon show how the system is designed to fill in the time gaps between the film releases and furthermore extend the backstory. The continuous introduction of games and toys on the *Cars* and *Toy Story* platforms represents and facilitate systems of expectations. Expectation which involves planning and waiting for the next releases seems to represent a driver for

the elicitation of feelings of desire for the upcoming games, toys, films, TV series, etc., and therefore fulfills the desire to desire.

The planning and waiting can, for example, motivate collecting, preparing, and fantasizing about possible play-futures with friends. Transmedia storytelling also facilitates a social system of interaction. This in itself represents a facet of desire in that the social system encourages others to purchase in order to be able to play properly in groups. In addition, having products that have emerged from the transmedia storytelling system serves as a symbol of belonging or affiliation in a social group. The system of interaction also represents or facilitates the elicitation of pleasure by the activation of communication among children or the people playing. This communication can take many forms, for example competing, mimicking, exploring, risk-taking, and of course conversation verbally and visually [29, 33]. Character toys from previous releases within the transmedia storytelling system may still be experienced as valuable by their owner even though many new characters have come to be in the newer films and games, this, since the old characters also show up in the new releases. Thus, the filmmakers still valued the characters. This situation represents a dimension of social proof presented by the film and therefore pleasure and possibly a facet of emotional durability of the character toys for the owner.

Transmedia storytelling represents a system in which the children's coming desire for play experiences are thoroughly planned by the toy developer. This system represents a strong context of influence by exemplifying and introducing potential experiences via films, cartoons, advertisements etc. [34, 35]. This may lead to a perception of a promise of full access- to enjoyment, and to the object of agalma that generate feelings of love, fascination, idealization. The promise of full access to enjoyment may be a good way to elicit feelings of desire yet also an effective way to hinder feelings of enjoyment or pleasure.

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