

# Building a Brand Through Transmedia Audience Engagement Strategies : Avatar's Transmedia Marketing

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**RÉSUMÉ** : À partir de l'étude d'un cas concret, Avatar, l'épopée 3D de James Cameron sortie en 2009, cet article propose une réflexion économique autour des stratégies dites « transmédiatiques » dans l'univers des franchises audiovisuelles et cinématographiques. Nous nous attacherons à montrer comment dans le cadre de nouveaux usages et de nouvelles pratiques médiatiques, la mise en place d'expériences ludiques, interactives et immersives se déployant sur des plateformes média multiples est devenue partie intégrante de la production et de la promotion de franchises médiatiques. L'analyse de la stratégie de lancement multi-plateforme et interactive d'Avatar mettra en relief la manière dont le film et sa campagne de promotion peuvent être considérés comme faisant partie d'un même ensemble narratif, approfondissant l'histoire, enrichissant l'« expérience Avatar » et brouillant davantage les frontières de plus en plus poreuses entre contenu culturel et promotion.

**MOTS-CLÉS** : CONVERGENCE, FRANCHISE TRANSMÉDIA, MARKETING TRANSMÉDIA, ÉCONOMIE TRANSMÉDIA, ÉCONOMIE DE L'ATTENTION, MÉDIAS SOCIAUX, ADVERGAMING

**SUMMARY** : This paper explores the economic implications of transmedia brand expansions and entertainment, focusing on the detailed investigation of a case study : James Cameron's 3D epic movie Avatar. Our intention is to describe how in the shifting technological and economic environment of the contemporary entertainment industry, the process of designing compelling interactive and immersive experiences delivered across multiple media channels and platforms has come to occupy a key position in building and marketing media franchises. Our analysis of Avatar's promotional strategy will show how the multiplatform and social media launch campaign stands out as something that can be regarded on the same level as the movie itself, building new narratives that add to the story and contribute to the extension of the « Avatar experience » beyond the movie's diegetic universe, further blurring the lines between entertainment and advertising.

**KEYWORDS** : CONVERGENCE, TRANSMEDIA FRANCHISE, TRANSMEDIA MARKETING, TRANSMEDIA ECONOMY, ATTENTION ECONOMY, SOCIAL MEDIA, ADVERGAMING

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In her definition of intermediality, Silvestra Mariniello encompasses a large spectrum of intermedial phenomena : heterogeneity, combination, repurposing, recycling, adaptation, media convergence, media interaction<sup>2</sup>. As Christy Dena argues in her thesis on transmedia (2009, p. 87), while there is a higher-level congruency between intermedia and transmedia (the urge to bring together into one project distinct media and artforms), transmedia practices are characterized by « unmixed media », which is a key trait of transmedia projects. The primary objective in transmedia projects is not integration but connection and cooperation (van de Poel, 2005). However, Dena argues that :

Fusion does exist in transmedia projects, but it happens at an abstract level. It is characterized by a conceptual synthesis of separate media rather than an assemblage or transformation at the expressive or material level. The peculiar challenge of this approach is to bring together elements that are disparate, incompatible or isolated, in a way that retains their independent nature [...]. The objects change, but that change happens around the materials, within the minds of those who design and experience them. Unity is perceived, variety is manifest. (Dena, 2009, p. 87)

In this paper, we shall not discuss the aesthetic implications of what has been variously called cross-media, trans-media, distributed or immersive narratives. Nor shall we analyze transmedia world-building strategies. We shall instead focus on the industrial implications of transmedia, most importantly in the field of promotion, focusing on the detailed investigation of a case study : James Cameron's epic movie *Avatar*. Our purpose here is to show how the process of designing new inter-trans/cross-media entertainment experiences has come to occupy a key position in the fast-paced technological and economic environment of the contemporary entertainment industry. Leaving aside the hyperbolic style of industry rhetoric, which saw in Cameron's futurist science fiction 3D

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<sup>2</sup> « On entend l'intermédialité comme hétérogénéité ; comme conjonction de plusieurs systèmes de communication et de représentation ; comme recyclage dans une pratique médiatique, le cinéma par exemple, d'autres pratiques médiatiques, la bande dessinée, l'Opéra comique, etc. ; comme convergence de plusieurs médias ; comme interaction entre médias ; comme emprunt ; comme interaction de différents supports ; comme intégration d'une pratique avec d'autres ; comme adaptation ; comme assimilation progressive de procédés variés ; comme flux d'expériences sensorielles et esthétiques plutôt qu'interaction entre textes clos ; comme faisceau de liens entre médias ; comme l'événement des relations médiatiques variables entre les médias [...] » (Mariniello, 1999).

movie a milestone event<sup>3</sup>, *Avatar* marked not only a cultural and social media phenomenon but also a turning point in entertainment consumption practices. As Charles Acland argues, it

is celebrated and promoted to stand out as a flagship work beckoning the next wave of industrial and consumer technologies and entertainments. With *Avatar*, we have 3-D filming processes, 3-D exhibition, digital exhibition and 3-D home entertainment all counting on the film's appeal for their own advancement. (Acland, 2010)

Therefore, the discursive construction of the movie as a game-changing technological and industrial event turned into a vehicle of promoting the disruptive power of new digital, multimedia and interactive communication technologies<sup>4</sup>.

*Avatar*'s key contribution in optimizing sales of digital equipment to theaters all over the world has been the subject of academic inquiry since the movie's release<sup>5</sup>. Our intention is to describe how *Avatar*'s launch marketing also became a vehicle for promoting the latest entertainment business models Hollywood has been experimenting with in the wake of convergence and interactive communication technologies. In other words, *Avatar* highlights how important multi-platform brand expansions have become for Hollywood studios in a constantly adapting digital multi-media and multi-channel landscape. Moreover, analyzing *Avatar*'s transmedia marketing campaign is an interesting case study, as contrary to many contemporary Hollywood franchises with build-in audience, *Avatar* did not have a previous brand to build on<sup>6</sup>. According to Kristin Thompson, « the follow-ups to these films create a franchise, and the franchise creates a brand » (2007, p. 5-6). In the case of Cameron's movie, it was the other way around, as Cameron (2000) admits : « [*Avatar*] put pressure on us to create the equivalent value of an existing brand without being an

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3 When *Avatar* was released on December 18th 2009, after over a decade in the making, critics and industry insiders immediately heralded it as a new era in the history of the international film industry. An avalanche of headlines, from national newspapers, mainstream magazines and trade journals to online posts, echoed the same argument : *Avatar* was a « benchmark movie » (cf. Douglas, « Exclusive : Soderbergh Gives *Avatar* High Praise », *ComingSoon.net*, April 30th 2009, retrieved from <http://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/54966-exclusive-soderbergh-gives-avatar-high-praise>)

4 It has been widely acknowledged that *Avatar* played an essential part in convincing exhibitors internationally to convert to digital, emerging as a most effective growth accelerator for 3D cinema business.

5 See Acland (2010).

6 It eventually gave birth to franchise, the second and third installments of the franchise having been scheduled to shoot simultaneously early in 2014.

existing brand »<sup>7</sup>. Our analysis will show how through a carefully designed multiplatform social media marketing campaign, 20th Century-Fox marketing team and Starlight Runner Entertainment created a fan base and achieved brand participation and exposure several months before the release. At the same time they used the campaign as an opportunity to build new inter/trans/cross-media ludic experiences, transforming it into something that can be regarded on the same level as the movie itself, adding to the story and contributing to the extension of the « Avatar experience » beyond the film's diegetic universe.

## The rise of the attention economy and the emergence of the transmedia consumer

In recent years, Hollywood has been increasingly dependant on high concept movies and franchises with build-in audience, shifting towards a diversified multi-platform approach to production and distribution of content designed to increase the marketing and business synergy between the different company divisions. As Richard Maltby (2003, p. 211) suggests « the integrated entertainment marketplace is most receptive to multi-media franchises and once the majors created a corporate structure designed to maximize the benefits of synergy, they found themselves inevitably obliged to develop products capable of «synergistic brand expansion» ». While repurposing or re-versioning existing content across additional media platforms is an entertainment and media business strategy with a long history<sup>8</sup>, studios today seek to engage audiences beyond tentpole movie releases and traditional brand extension strategies (television shows, music products, theme park attractions, brand-related licensed merchandise, comics, video games, etc.).

With audiences being exposed to a much wider range of media, delivery platforms and contents than before, competition on media markets has intensified since attention has emerged as the scarcest and most vital economic resource. As Umair Haque (2005a) explain : « New technologies are disrupting and inverting these economics, by making attention to the scarcest resource in the value chain. Because these technologies make production and distribution relatively more abundant than attention, returns to attention for incumbents begin to erode. » Analyzing the Hollywood blockbuster strategy in the new media environment, Haque (2005b) argues that the profusion of media platforms and contents has caused attention to become more expensive for Hollywood marketers to buy, leading the industry to increased concentration insofar as returns to rising attention costs remain high only for large scale players.

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7 Quoted in « James Cameron's Avatar film – will its marketing be as innovative as its filming ? », Ruth Mortimer's Blog of Brand and Business – Marketing Week, retrieved from <http://brandstrategy.wordpress.com/>

8 It can be traced back in the 1950s with Disney and in the late 1970s with Star Wars, which Scott Bukatman (1998, p. 248) has described as « less a movie than an extended multimedia universe ».

At the same time, the overall media consumption process and the audiences' relation to the media and the media markers (producers, writers, media organizations, etc.) has also been transformed<sup>9</sup> since convergence, Web 2.0 technologies and affordable creative tools have given rise to multi-platform media consumption and media multitasking, particularly among the 15-24 year-olds born into an entirely digital environment, and to new forms of creativity and participation (driven by social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter). As David Beer and Roger Burrows (2007) argue : « Perhaps the key-defining feature of Web 2.0 is that users are involved in the processes of production and consumption as they generate and browse online content, as they tag and blog, post and share. » By allowing people to upload, comment, recommend, re-edit and share content any way they chose, content-sharing websites encourage them to endorse different positions as producers, consumers, or « producers » of media content. Social network connectivity, fuelled by the growth in the broadband mobile market these past few years<sup>10</sup>, has altered the way people connect and share information, the way they access and engage with media content, share their cultural tastes as well as their own creative content (from written comments, to fan-fictions and remixes). As a result, media fragmentation and more dynamic models of audience behaviour have put more pressure on networks, broadcasters and content providers to capture the consumers' attention and manage their loyalty with valuable content, feedback and social media dialogue. Hollywood studios and their parent media and entertainment corporations seem to have fully grasped the importance of synergy across platforms within franchises and single stories, making and selling movies not as discrete entities but as part of « inhabitable worlds » (Grainge, 2007, p. 54-60) prone to « synergistic brand expansion » (Maltby, 2003, p. 211).

In his analysis of convergence culture, Jenkins (2003) shows how the growing trend of transmedia<sup>11</sup> consumers embracing many different media, and « taking pleasure in tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts within the same franchise », opens « multiple entry points into the consumption process » (Jenkins, 2012, p. 284). This means that each media consumption becomes a different entry into the franchise as a whole, which unfolds as a « unified and coordinated

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9 See Deller, 2011, p. 228.

10 According to a recent study (*The World Bank*, 2012, p. 3), between 2000 and 2012, the number of mobile phones in use worldwide grew from fewer than 1 billion to around 6 billion.

11 The term « transmedia » has been introduced by media theorists Marsha Kinder (1999) and Henry Jenkins (2003). In his book *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006, p. 97-98), Jenkins uses the term « transmedia storytelling » to describe how content providers develop stories that unfold « across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole ». As Jenkins has pointed out, « pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media » refreshes the franchise, broadens the audience and motivates consumer loyalty.

entertainment experience » (to use Jenkins words<sup>12</sup>), creating greater value for the audiences – and therefore more money for the studios – as the latter find « euphoria in collecting and connecting the pieces » of the puzzle<sup>13</sup>. The economic motivations of transmedia development are therefore clear : through narrative threads and entertainment experiences specifically tailored for and dispersed across different media platforms and audiences, Hollywood studios hope to multiply the number of customer touch-points, broaden the revenue streams and expand the life-cycle of their franchises beyond the traditional retail windows and licensed product tie-ins by engaging audiences and keeping them connected with the franchise all-year long. To use Acland's words, « we are in the era of a permanent marketing campaign, where the selling of an entertainment environment is ongoing, an activity punctuated by commodity texts ». Acland further argues that « the extension of film marketing is also a function of the widening life cycle of film texts, drumming up audiences as works pass from one territory to another, from one medium to another » (Acland, 2003, p. 77).

Transmedia development is therefore on its way to reshaping the production and marketing process of media properties: « filmmakers are as much in the business of creating licensed goods as they are in telling stories » (Jenkins, 2006, p. 115). It is thus no surprise that in 2010, the Producers Guild of America added the title of « transmedia producer » in its code of credits, recognizing that « as technology evolves, it's no longer adequate to think of a project as simply a television show or a movie »<sup>14</sup>. For Starlight Runner CEO and transmedia guru Jeff Gomez, whose credits include James Cameron's *Avatar* :

Aspirational worlds and immersive universes are replacing consumer loyalties to movie stars and network television. Right now, the sharpest studios are planning from earliest development to build their tentpole and youth-targeted properties so their storylines will translate to an array of traditional and new media platforms, which has the potential to significantly enhance or even fundamentally change the relationship between intellectual property creators, owners and licensees. (Gomez, 2010).

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<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Jeff Gomez, quoted in Andersen, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> The « transmedia producer » credit is « given to the person(s) responsible for a significant portion of a project's long-term planning, development, production, and/or maintenance of narrative continuity across multiple platforms, and creation of original storylines for new platforms ». Cf. <http://www.producersguild.org>

Analyzing the marketing implications of transmedia storytelling, Carlos Scolari (2009, p. 586-606) pertinently points out that « Transmedia storytelling even introduces a mutation to this scenario in which the brand is no longer inside the fiction, but rather the fiction is the brand ». The importance of narrative worlds as brands has also been pinpointed by David Garrett, co-founder of Summit Entertainment : « the traditional business of producing and distributing films to theaters has become more and more random, even if it still generates considerable revenues on big titles. We have to develop brand and franchises that work across the new platforms » (quoted in Wright, 2011, p.13). This is exactly what Cameron and Starlight Runner Entertainment set out to do with *Avatar*. The value of the *Avatar* brand in the director's future business plans is perfectly illustrated in an interview with Edward Wong, *New York Times* journalist, in May 2012. Cameron said : « I'm not interested in developing anything. I'm in the "Avatar" business. Period. That's it. I'm making "Avatar 2", "Avatar 3", maybe "Avatar 4", and I'm not going to produce other people's movies for them. I'm not interested in taking scripts. »<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, designing and producing compelling transmedia experiences can be very expensive and time consuming both for content producers and audiences. Elaborate transmedia extensions are designed to create ludic opportunities for highly engaged audiences, namely established fans with disposable time and income. As Jenkins (2012) acknowledges, « a transmedia franchise that spans comics, television, films and games can have each of its components serve as a gateway into the entire franchise for "native" fans of those particular media, but an Everest like *Star Wars* or *Halo* is a massive undertaking looming on a newcomer's horizon ». Increasing the appeal of the transmedia franchise to broader audiences and developing mainstream demand is a big challenge in transmedia economics<sup>16</sup>. Science fiction writer Maureen McHugh (2010) claims that « transmedia projects have attracted hundreds of thousands of "hits", that is, websites have had hundreds of thousands different people come to them, but no media project has yet broken out into mainstream awareness. There is no transmedia equivalent to *Twilight*, or *Grand Theft Auto*, no Lady Gaga or even *Mad Men* ».

Hollywood film business as a key mechanism to promotion, audience building and brand engagement. Studios have come to realize how fanlike audiences and their bottom up activities can be used as « influencers » to expand their franchises' reach to much wider audiences than those available to marketers. In

15 Quoted in Wong, « James Cameron on Chinese Filmmakers, Censorship and Potential Co-Productions », *MediaCover*, 2012 May 5th, retrieved from <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/>

16 However, this raises questions about the actual range of transmedia consumption. Transmedia experts estimate that only 25 to 30 % of the audience are « active consumers » (with 5 to 10 % being « enthusiasts »), the bulk of the audience being casual consumers (70 %). What is, therefore, at stake in transmedia development is transforming the casual consumers to active (and ideally enthusiastic) audience. Cf. Weinbrecht, 2011.

his analysis of transmedia consumers' value for media companies, Charles Davis (2013, p. 175) asserts that fanlike consumers are almost always the implied audience for transmedia properties : « transmedia audience engagement strategies largely seek to elicit fan-like behaviors entailing psychological investment and social involvement in “spreading”, distributing, commenting on, and creating media content ». Davis also argues that fanlike audiences are considerably more valuable to media and entertainment corporations than the average media consumer «in terms of product spending, loyalty, propensity to recommend brand affinity, media value and acquisition cost » (*Idem*, p. 180). As will be shown below in our study of *Avatar*'s launch campaign, 20th Century-Fox adopted transmedia audience engagement strategies in order to build for the *Avatar* brand the kind of engaged community that usually comes with franchises, recruiting fans months, if not a year, before the movie's release.

### **When old and new media combine to build brand awareness and audience anticipation**

Not having a previous brand to build on, Cameron, Starlight and Fox had to educate the audiences to the movie's plot, visual universe and large-scale technological innovation. Tom Rothman, co-chair and CEO of Fox Filmed Entertainment, talking about *Avatar*'s advertising campaign at a panel during *Variety*'s marketing summit in October 2010 explained : « There was no pre-awareness in the culture. It was just a word, and no one knew what that word meant » (quoted in McClintock and Zima, 2010). In marketing the film, he said, « the studio had to step all the way back and educate the audiences on this original world » (*Ibidem*). As we will see later on, the audiences' general education on the *Avatar* universe (where the concept of immersion and interactivity is more overplayed than the 3D format) was mostly organized via the digital and online media, which also contributed to the extension of the « *Avatar* experience » beyond the film's diegetic universe<sup>17</sup>. With the movie being transformed into a worldwide critical test for 3D's appeal at the box-office as early as November 2008 (and while no official trailer, no photograph or poster had been publicized yet<sup>18</sup>), building a fan base constantly connected with the project months before *Avatar* actually came out became the core strategy of the campaign, as the further the word *Avatar* would spread on social media generating a large amount of brand exposure, the more

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17 For *Avatar*'s launch, Fox made limited use of outdoor communication favoring Internet, mobile, theatre and television advertising. Cameron has claimed that Fox's decision not to do any outdoor advertising stemmed from some negative comments on the blogosphere about the look of the characters.

18 A leaked photo from the WETA workshop showing some preproduction material from the movie and a teaser poster was revealed in 2007 (at <http://www.aintitcool.com>) but was quickly removed.

the exhibitors would feel the pressure to upgrade to digital<sup>19</sup>. In a way, *Avatar*'s fans, through their engagement with content released in various formats (photos, trailers, posters, Facebook posts, etc.) through different platforms and channels, became active participants in building the story of the *Avatar* revolution for the reluctant exhibition companies internationally.



*Announcement of first official photo for Avatar feed the buzz on social media.*

At the end of 2008, *Avatar*'s communication would reveal very few of the film's visual universe. However, the closely-guarded project was feeding the buzz on Internet as reports of filmmakers and industry insiders having seen footage of the film and calling it already a revolution reached the press. In May 2009, a first trailer accompanying the release of *Transformers 2*, in the United States, was revealed to the American public. It fed even more the speculations about the film, still unveiling nothing regarding one of the film's most important elements: 3D. *Avatar*'s first photograph was released mid-August 2009, five months before the film's release. But it was not until October, that the first exclusive images reached the press (in the monthly movie magazine *Empire*). In an interview with *Advertising Age* journalist, Pamela Levine, Fox's marketing president, said : « We consciously held back, because this isn't a movie you want to start being too loud about too early on. » (quoted in Hampp, 2010)

As for the exhibitors, they would start discovering footage from the film only by June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009. At Cinema Expo 2009, the most talked-about pan-European convention and trade show dedicated to the movie theatre industry, organized in Amsterdam, Cameron and Fox's marketing team « teased » *Avatar*, screening a 24-minute promo assemblage to an estimated 1250 total attendees

19 As Thomas Jegeus, co-president of 20th Century-Fox International, put it, « we have to convert their minds so they can then start converting their theatres » (quoted in *Daily Variety*, <http://variety.com/2008/film/news/stars-shine-for-fox-at-cinema-expo-1117988001/>, June 24th 2008). Cameron, producer Jon Landau and Fox's marketing team would preview the film through the most important and talked-about trade shows with a clear message : « Hurry ! Avatar is coming. »

from the European movie industry. Officially, Fox had urged media covering the event not to report details of the film or interview audience members for reactions. Comments on the footage were spread instantly and anonymously to many websites and blogs, building even more excitement among fans and intensifying audience anticipation<sup>20</sup>. The 24-minute promo clip was also screened before an audience of 6 000 hardcore fans at the San Diego ComicCon annual convention on July 23rd, where the director and the studio announced an unusual and most innovating marketing event they called « Avatar Day » planned for August 21<sup>st</sup>. The operation was designed with the purpose of motivating fans to engage in online word of mouth anticipation and social coverage and create media buzz (massively relayed on the Internet), which would add pressure on exhibitors to install more 3D screens.

From August 17<sup>th</sup>, American hardcore fans were able to book on the film's official site their seats for attending one of *Avatar's* 15-minute free screenings. The « Avatar Day »<sup>21</sup> gathered thousands of fans worldwide around what was about to become the largest preview screening ever. *Avatar's* 129-second teaser trailer (as well as the official game trailer) was released online in time to create additional word of mouth for the event and instantly became the most downloaded trailer on apple.com registering over four million streams in its first day (Mendoza, 2010). In France, in less than five days, more than 11,000 comments were posted on the especially dedicated to « Avatar Day » forum of the French film web site portal allocine.fr. For the release of the three and a half minute trailer early in November 2009, Fox adopted a « red-carpet approach » literally promoting the trailer that would promote the film. It premiered on the Diamond Vision screen, considered to be the world's largest High-Definition video display, during a Dallas Cowboys football game at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas and was simultaneously seen by millions of viewers tuning into Fox NFL to watch the match<sup>22</sup>.

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20 Cameron and Fox repeated the show for American exhibitors in July 2009.

21 Tickets for the « Avatar Day » were free and given out during an online lottery. The screening took place in a total of 101 Imax theaters domestically and another 238 cinemas abroad of which 30 were Imax venues. Cf. McClintock, « Big splash for "Avatar" clip », *Variety*, August 23rd 2009, retrieved from <http://variety.com/2009/film/news/big-splash-for-avatar-clip-1118007626/>

22 McClintock, « Cowboy crowd gets "Avatar" eyeful », *Variety*, October 29th 2009, retrieved from <http://www.variety.com>. DreamWorks used the Feb. 1 Super Bowl to air the heavily promoted *Monsters vs. Aliens* spot in 3D.



*Teasing the teaser trailer on iTunes.*

## **Social media as a driver to get people connected with the Avatar world**

Social media were an integral cog in *Avatar*'s campaign. Social media platforms can play different roles for storytelling : « They move story forward and they spread story in a way that we've never been able to do before »<sup>23</sup>. The movie's digital communication represents an interesting case of leveraging the growing popularity of social media and using their expansive nature in order to generate electronic word of mouth by creating content that fans would want to emotionally interact with and actively talk about. Usually, word of mouth activities are the most active during a movie's pre-release and opening. In *Avatar*'s case, the buzz began to build with the film still in production and before Fox even opened a sponsored Twitter account (in July 2009, concomitantly to the screening of the film's promo-clip at Comic Con). Eventually the film generated an impressive 15 000 blog posts per day between December 2009 and January 2010. By retweeting, sharing and reblogging, fans contributed in spreading the news about the latest events in *Avatar*'s campaign faster and wider than any other media marketers had at their disposal. In order to build brand awareness and word of mouth prior to the «Avatar Day» event, the teaser trailer was first exclusively released on apple.com on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August and internationally on YouTube homepages

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<sup>23</sup> Alex LeMay, CEO, founder and executive producer at The Shadow Gang, a multi-platform production company specialized in thriller entertainment, quoted by Anna Washenko, « Transmedia Storytelling Example with BZRK », June 18th 2013, retrieved from <http://sproutsocial.com/insights/transmedia-campaign-social/>

across fifteen markets<sup>24</sup> on the 22<sup>th</sup> of August. According to a Google/Metrixlab survey in the United Kingdom, the YouTube campaign drove some of the highest lifts in top of mind awareness (+17 %) and spontaneous awareness (+25 %) as well as a 15 % increase in intent to watch the movie. The survey also showed that exposure to the trailer on YouTube's homepage produced a strong increase in searches on YouTube directly after seeing the advertisement<sup>25</sup>.

For the December world premiere, Fox allowed YouTube's top active users the exclusive right to experience first hand the premiere by filming from the red carpet and from a fan's perspective<sup>26</sup>. Aegis Media then edited the content in order for it to appear online before any news site. The premiere was also broadcasted live to web audiences on the video-streaming platform Ustream and directly to *Avatar's* MySpace page. According to Vizeum Global Management (who handled the operation), the Global Premiere Brand Channel created by five YouTube super users became the largest brand channel created in just five days with 379 700 video users<sup>27</sup>. Early in December, after the second trailer had been broadcasted on television, MTV.com, in association with Facebook, produced a 30-minute special *Avatar Live* webcast sponsored by LG<sup>28</sup> as a prelude to a half-hour television special *Behind the scenes* which would air in December 16<sup>th</sup>. It featured a roundtable with director James Cameron, producer Jon Landau and lead actors Zoe Saldana and Sam Worthington who answered live the questions posted by the fans on *Avatar's* Facebook page<sup>29</sup>. As a bonus, the Facebook community was allowed to take a look at exclusive unseen images of the film, before its release<sup>30</sup>.

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24 Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Russia, Mexico, Australia, Brazil, Japan, South Korea and Hong-Kong.

25 « Leveraging the power of video to generate intent to view a movie », *Avatar Ad Effectiveness Study*, Google/MetrixLab, United Kingdom, September 2009.

26 James Quilter, « Fox to take over YouTube for Avatar launch », December 8th 2009, retrieved from <http://www.brandrepublic.com>

27 Information retrieved from <http://www.vizeum.com/work/20th-century-fox-%E2%80%93-avatar/> (August 18th, 2012). According to Vizeum, this resulted to 12,418 word of mouth ticket sales.

28 Sponsoring the *Avatar Live* webcast was part of a joint television and online marketing campaign aiming at promoting both the *Avatar* brand and LG's new touchscreen chocolate, the BL40. It also included sponsoring the Facebook page created by Fox and MTV, creating a micro website or pre-loading the *Avatar* trailer onto the handset.

29 The *Avatar* Facebook fan page counted more than one a half million fans before the film's release. Cf. Nick Mendoza, « MediaShift : How Digital Marketing Helped "Avatar" Break the Box-Office », <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2010/02/how-digital-marketing-helped-avatar-break-the-box-office039.html> (advised on November 11th 2010).

30 Cf. Jon Weisman, « MTV sets *Avatar* webcast », *Variety*, November 29th 2009.



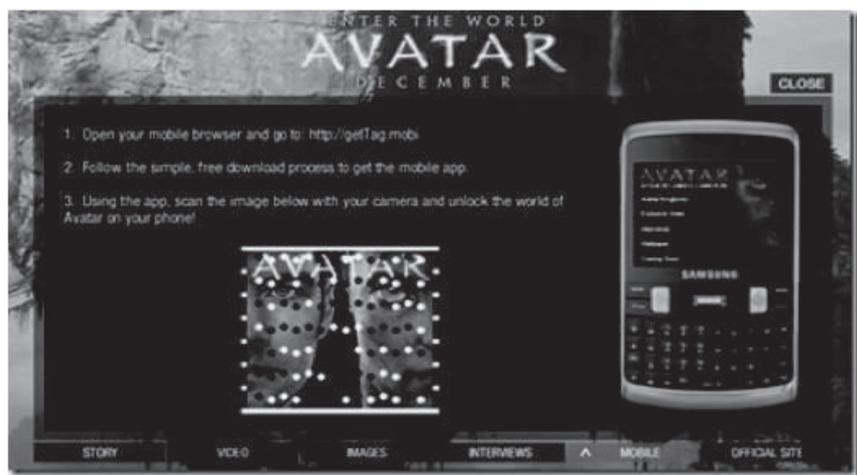
*The MTV live event in association with Facebook.*

## **A multi-platform approach driving audience engagement...**

Fox International, Lightstorm Entertainment and Microsoft advertising partnered to launch the largest at the time digital multi-screen campaign<sup>31</sup>. The campaign, which ran across several Microsoft properties including MSN homepage, MSN Mobile, Xbox LIVE, Windows 7 and Zune Marketplace, covered synergistically all the available digital platforms from television screens to PCs and mobile phones to deliver an interactive engaging *Avatar* experience. On the PC screen and through the MSN homepage taken over for several days, visitors were given access to exclusive content from customized desktop themes (downloaded 3,5 million times), to high resolution *Avatar* video clips and other content, while a social media element enabled them to share the official site with their friends via Windows Live, MySpace, Twitter and Facebook. The campaign also included an *Avatar*-specific Windows 7 theme and an *Avatar* tag image. By scanning the tag on the PC screen with their phone's camera, mobile users in five major markets could instantly enter the official *Avatar* Wap site.

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<sup>31</sup> The campaign covered 15 countries and 18 different languages.



*The Avatar tag image.*

On the television screen, Xbox Live gamers could click on the interactive banners integrated within Microsoft's online game service dashboard environment that linked to the movie trailer and other downloadable exclusive content such as themes and gamer pictures. The campaign was also coordinated with the global launch of Microsoft's Zune Marketplace in November 2009 that featured an exclusive HD 4-minute trailer of the film. On the mobile screen and through MSN Mobile, users in four major markets were being directed on the day of the film's release by banner advertisements to the official *Avatar* Wap site<sup>32</sup>.

The multi-platform marketing approach proved to be very successful at driving awareness and virally increasing movie attendance. According to Microsoft Advertising, consumers who saw *Avatar* advertising across all three screens were nearly three times as likely to watch the film as those who only engaged with one channel. Nearly 44 % of them actually went to see the film in theatres<sup>33</sup>. According to Microsoft France, more than one-third of consumers who watched the film's trailer on their mobile phones went to see the movie as well. Since *Avatar*'s launch campaign, Hollywood studios are more and more investing in

32 Cf. « *Avatar's multi-screen campaign drives fans to theaters all over the world* », Microsoft Advertising report, retrieved from <http://advertising.microsoft.com> on September 20th 2012 ; « *Avatar Movie Trailer crosses 3 screens : MSN, Mobile & Xbox* », retrieved from <http://community.microsoftadvertising.com> on November 13th 2010.

33 According to a Microsoft survey, 54 % of consumers who saw *Avatar* ads on all three screens said they were likely to see the film compared to 28 % who saw the ads on two screens and 22 % who saw the ad on a single channel. Cf. « *The Holiday guide to mobile advertising* », retrieved from <http://advertising.microsoft.com> on September 21st, 2012 and « *What's on Their Screens, What's on Their Mind* », Microsoft report retrieved from <http://advertising.microsoft.com> on September 20th 2012.

mobile marketing in order to connect with users in a deeper way, to reach specific audience demographics, to build awareness for the trailer or the movie's release and drive ticket or DVD sales.

### ... and participating in the creation of a layered, ramified narrative

While official film websites have diminished in importance, since marketers prefer to place their advertising content on third-party platforms with a big web traffic, *Avatar's* official site ([avatarmovie.com](http://avatarmovie.com)) played a crucial role in creating a global experience of the *Avatar* world and, as a result, in increasing its brand awareness. It offered an exclusive interactive content that went beyond the standard fare of the movie's official images, wallpapers and trailers (such as details regarding the plot, bios of the film's main characters, interactive wallpapers, an ARG game for I-phone developed by Gameloft), while visitors were invited to contribute their own content and share the anticipation before the movie's release through the official *Avatar* Community (which included exclusive images, behind-the-scenes videos, real-time updates of *Avatar* activity taking place on the social media, photo-caption contests and free ticket giveaways) and exclusive *Avatar*-themed TypePad Micro blog<sup>34</sup>.

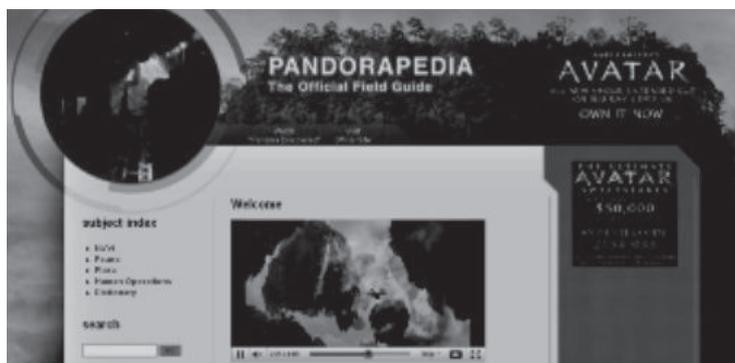


*Avatar's* official website.

The website also provided another entry into the Pandora world, giving visitors the opportunity to further immerse themselves into the director's universe. For instance, *Pandorapedia* ([www.pandorapedia.com](http://www.pandorapedia.com)) is an entirely interactive guide allowing the visitor to learn more about the Pandora planet, its fauna and flora as well as its indigenous population. It even proposes a dictionary from

34 Cf. <http://everything.typepad.com/blog/2009/12/win-avatar-tickets-an-xbox-360-and-more.html> and Nick Mendoza, « How Digital Marketing Helped "Avatar" Break the Box-Office », <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2010/02/how-digital-marketing-helped-avatar-break-the-box-office039.html>, February 8th 2010.

English to Na'vi. *The Home Tree Initiative* addresses Internet users' ecological conscience (a theme explored in the film's script) and invites them to contribute in the salvation of the planet. Interaction is also the word in *Pandorama*, an immersive virtual tour of Pandora, accessible via the movie's homepage by the means of a webcam.



*The Interactive guide to Pandora.*

Finally, the website featured a special interactive trailer shot in HD and revealed in November 2009. It offered eleven points of interaction, each unlocking additional content that enabled users to enrich their knowledge of the *Avatar* world and get more information on each character. The trailer also included social media feeds and three options to purchase tickets for the movie. In December 2009, attendance of the website exceeded 850.000 unique visits.

## Co-branding and advergaming

In recent years, studios have been increasingly using advergaming (branded video gaming) as a means to attract game-oriented audiences' attention (mostly young, videogame enthusiasts who are also movie fans) to their coming releases and influence ticket purchase intent. While the advergaming developed for films such as *King Kong*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Bewitched*, *Chicken Little* or *The Incredible Hulk* were low-bandwidth games with primitive flash animation, designed to be played on the web browser by using a mouse or the keyboard, as video-game technology expanded into the area of virtual reality and augmented reality, advergaming became more elaborate, often moving into the real world, delivering truly immersive experiences<sup>35</sup>. They have thus emerged as an essential component of transmedia storytelling and alternative marketing strategies. The *Dark Knight* game (which included 300

<sup>35</sup> While generally web based, they rely on text messaging, GPS tracking, instant messaging, web video, real world meetings, etc. to broaden the play.

real-world events), for instance, emerged as a powerful viral marketing tool insofar as it began with 100 000 players and ended up with 10 million<sup>36</sup>. In the case of *Avatar*, Mattel created *Avatar* toys (action figures, vehicles and alien creatures) that came with an i-Tag (created by Total immersion) unlocking exclusive content when shown to a webcam, while Coca Cola produced *Avatar*-branded Coke Zero cans (140 million cans and 8 million refrigerator packs in the United States alone<sup>37</sup>) with the AVTR mark, the name of the military program in the movie, which allowed consumers to maneuver a Samson helicopter featured in the movie when held in front of a webcam<sup>38</sup>. The ARG experience was also unlocked when users took pictures of the AVTR mark or Coke Zero logo with certain camera phones or visiting AVTR.com, the special website designed by 20th Century-Fox and Starlight Entertainment which would provide them with the technology to access the experience. The augmented reality game was part of a larger overall campaign centered around the AVTR website designed by 20th Century-Fox and Lightstorm Entertainment whose purpose was to co-promote the *Avatar* and the Coca Cola Zero brand (aimed at 18- to 24-year-old males). The website gave users the opportunity to plunge into Pandora by means of games, exclusive downloadable screensavers and a webseries featuring exclusive reports from the planet (broadcasted for two consecutive months), giving background information on the movie's mythological and visual universe.



*The AVTR website featuring an exclusive webseries.*

36 Cf. « ARG's : the play's the thing », July 10th 2010, retrieved from <http://www.variety.com>.

37 Cf. Marc Grasner, « "Avatar" toys with augmented reality », November 19th 2009, retrieved from <http://www.variety.com>

38 The helicopter appeared to be floating freely in front of the user who could manipulate its movement and trigger different actions, such as shooting a missile, maneuvering the rotors of the helicopter or firing its guns, by using a computer keyboard. The AVTR mark also appeared on branded cups and popcorn bags sold in the theaters (see « Coke Zero immerses itself in "Avatar" », November 25th 2009, retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com>). An advertising campaign explaining how users could unlock the branded experience was launched in theaters in the United States (on October 31st 2009) and then on television (on November 14th 2009).

McDonald would also use *Avatar* augmented reality games to promote its Big Mac to young adults and Happy Meals to children. In the United States, Big Macs came with an *Avatar* Thrill Card that gave consumers access to a series of online games in which players would search for hidden objects within Pandora. Completing the game gave fans the chance to explore the planet on board of a virtual *Avatar* vehicle, a Pandora POVR, (by playing a three-level racing game). Finally, the *Thrill Card*, when held in front of a webcam, would unlock an augmented-reality game called McDVision<sup>39</sup>. In November 2009, McDo's new website also featured additional content related with the movie.

## Conclusion

In his analysis of promotion culture as *culture*, Jonathan Gray (2010, p. 309) demonstrates how promotions and paratexts « become viable parts of the text and, by extension, viable contributors to the esthetics, thematics and artistry associated with the text ». In transmedia marketing, the boundaries between promotion and creative content are, as we have seen, further blurred, since « the advertising becomes part of the movie – with the bonus that it is tailored for mobile devices and sharing across social networks »<sup>40</sup>. Promotional campaigns should thus be regarded as taking part to « a larger legacy that includes both the film and its promotional materials » (Kafoury Fischer, 2013, p. 45).

The main purpose of this paper was to analyse how crucial the role of social media marketing and transmedia engagement strategies was in building the *Avatar* brand, enriching the audience's experience and creating buzz around the film. Since *Avatar*, transmedia marketing has been increasingly used to launch film and television franchises (*The Hunger Games*, *Prometheus*, *World War Z*, *True Blood*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Borgias*...), as well as to promote existing franchises (*The Dark Knight Rises*, *Skyfall*, *Twilight Breaking Dawn : Part 2*) and sustain audience engagement between television shows seasons (*Dexter*, *Heroes*, *Sherlock*...). Further research should raise questions about transmedia « brand fanagement » strategies (Hills, 2012), only hinted in the present study<sup>41</sup>, the mainstreaming

39 « No McDonald's on Pandora, but Plenty of Avatar at McD's », December 10th 2009, retrieved from <http://www.wired.com>

40 « In Ridley Scott's "Prometheus," the Advertising Is Part of the Picture », *DigitalNext – A Blog on Emerging Media and Technology Advertising Age*, March 23rd 2012, retrieved from <http://adage.com/article/digitalnext/ridley-scott-s-prometheus-advertising-part-picture/233452/>

41 The term refers to the management of fan expectations, readings, responses and activities. Hills (2012, p. 409-425) notes that transmedia remains a form of brand management « seeking to manage the active fan audience and attempting to paratextually deactivate fan complaints ». A close examination of *Avatar*'s pre-launch and launch marketing reveals a certain degree of such « transmedia fanagement » directed at anticipating and responding to audience reaction about the look of the characters and the film's visual universe.

of fandom's gift economy (Scott, 2009<sup>42</sup>), as well as the impact of the increased blurring (in terms of scope and circulation) between official and fan-produced transmedia (ex. fan-authored ARGs) on media brand management<sup>43</sup>

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*42 Scott suggests that « Media producers, primarily through the lure of “gifted” ancillary content aimed at fans through official Web sites, are rapidly perfecting a mixed economy that obscures its commercial imperatives through a calculated adoption of fandom's gift economy, its sense of community, and the promise of participation ».*

*43 Analyzing official and fan-produced transmedia for The Hunger Games, Melanie Kohnen observes how they increasingly share the same media spaces. Cf. « Creating a Spark : Official and Fan-Produced Transmedia for the Hunger Games », posted on Antenna (media and cultural studies blog) on May 11th, 2012, retrieved from <http://blog.commarks.wisc.edu/2012/05/11/creating-a-spark-official-and-fan-produced-transmedia-for-the-hunger-games/>*

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