

Narrative Franchises
Drew Beard
University of Oregon

When I sit down to write about narrative franchises, I find myself thinking about successful and ongoing film franchises such as *Indiana Jones*, *Die Hard*, and *Friday the 13th*, among others. When it comes to the narrative franchises produced by television, however, I find things grow a little more complicated. One of the greatest challenges posed is defining the term of “franchise”: while we have the obviously franchised programs such as *Law and Order*, *CSI*, and *Star Trek*, there’s also the consideration of individual series, without spin-off programs, that qualify as franchises in that they’ve spawned a host of other media: the *X-Files* movie that cleared theaters this summer, the *Gossip Girl* novelizations on the shelves at Target, a particularly ill-starred *Desperate Housewives* computer game, and any number of action figures available from *The Simpsons*. The ability to successfully spawn additional, officially licensed commodities appears to be, up until now, the most fitting definition, one that isn’t predicated upon the television spin-off and one that allows for a wider view of what constitutes the franchise.

Having provided this definition, I’m interested in what distinguishes the television franchise from its film counterpart and the role played by genre. Traditionally, certain genres have lent themselves more easily to the act of franchising: science fiction, children’s programs, and more recently, the crime drama. Changes in television, particularly over the past two decades as “broadcasting” has transitioned to “narrowcasting” and the adoption of new delivery systems such as YouTube and DVD, have impacted what it means to be a franchise and which genres can undergo this process. Soap operas, for example, have not always been considered as easily franchised as other genres, especially when we consider this beyond the criteria of the spin-off. For example, despite the worldwide success of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in the early 1980s, attempts to merchandise these programs (“Forever Krystle” perfume, J.R. Ewing action figures) were never as successful as similar treatments afforded series such as *Star Trek* (a lack of success also found in their low performance in syndicated reruns when compared to shows that did not make heavy use of serialization). A serialized program did not lend itself as easily to other media as did science fiction or children’s programs (even the sitcom *Laverne and Shirley*, for example, produced a record album as well as the Saturday morning cartoon *Laverne and Shirley Join the Army*). Put simply, the existence of a franchise was based upon its ability to generate profits by using a property in different forms of media. Under narrowcasting and technological changes in how we consume media, the very notion of what it means to be a franchise has been transformed, so that ownership of the series and financial gain are no longer prerequisites for the act of franchising, a process which no longer seems as inextricably linked to officially sanctioned diversification and profit as before. In addition, I’d like to consider a genre, such as the soap opera, and how it evinces changes in television franchising, with fans both creating and accessing alternate forms of the property within new media such as YouTube.

The question that I'm seeking to pose here, now that I've advanced a workable if flawed definition of the television franchise, is how we can consider this under the emergence of new delivery systems that complicate notions of and relationships between franchise, genre, and ownership. What does it mean to be a television franchise today, not only for current programs but previous series still in circulation? Do fan-made videos on YouTube or fan fiction count as the growing of a franchise? What about the unauthorized fan posting television programs unlikely to be made available on DVD and the role they may or may not play in growing the franchise? If certain genres have been privileged in terms of the franchise, then does new media interact with television to meaningfully challenge that and the role played by the franchise?