

Narrative Franchises
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Sony, Spider-Man, and Conglomerate Hollywood

I'd like to approach this question somewhat obliquely by looking at Sony, the one global media conglomerate that does not rely on television for the lion's share of its income, and yet is developing an overall franchising strategy – best exemplified by Spider-Man – that is rapidly transforming the technological, industrial, and formal narrative configuration of television.

At present a cartel of six media giants – Time Warner, Disney, News Corp, Sony, Viacom/CBS, and GE (NBC Universal) – own all six of the major Hollywood film studios, all four of the U.S. broadcast TV networks, and the vast majority of the top cable networks, along with myriad other media and entertainment holdings. Their “filmed entertainment” divisions produce (and distribute) both movies and TV programs, and operate in close cooperation with their “home entertainment” (principally DVD) divisions. The conglomerates' hegemony within the U.S., the world's richest media market, is crucially geared to the integration of their film and television operations – with the notable exception of Sony. Four of the other five (all but Time Warner) own a U.S. broadcast network, while Time Warner boasts the massive TBS cable system along with HBO, the leading pay-cable network. TW also keeps pace with the others in TV series production-distribution, where Sony also lags behind.

Sony, meanwhile, has focused on hardware-software synergy, and in fact is light years ahead of the other media conglomerates in the strategic coordination and integration of its three major corporate divisions – Sony Pictures Entertainment, Sony Electronics, and Sony Computer Entertainment. These efforts have intensified with high-definition (HD) technology, which has had enormous impact on Sony's television, gaming, and home video operations via the its Blu-ray HD technology.

Key to Sony's integration of its film, gaming, and consumer electronics divisions has been its Spider-Man franchise, a “transmedia” global entertainment machine launched in 2002 with its breakthrough hit, Spider-Man (\$822 million in worldwide theatrical revenues), whose hit sequels have propelled the franchise into other media formats, while driving the sale of new consumer electronics products – principally game consoles and DVD players – that are having enormous impact on TV and home video use. Spider-Man 2 (2004) grossed \$784 million in worldwide box-office but did far better than the original on DVD – including a record 6 million units sold in its first day on the market. Sony used the film to expand its licensing and merchandising operations, resulting in multiple videogame versions and (in a licensing deal and veritable partnership with Marvel Comics) an increasingly complex, multivalent “Spider-Man universe.” Sony also “bundled” both the movie and videogame version(s) of Spider-Man 2 with its new PlayStation 2 (PS2) system, the world's best-selling game console in 2005.

These trends continued with Spider-Man 3 (2007), an awesome feat of marketing and media synergy – and a truly awful film – that speaks volumes about the direction not only of Sony but of cinema, television, and “media convergence” generally. Spider-Man 3 was the number-one box-office hit in the U.S. in 2007 (\$336 million), with additional income from foreign box-office (\$554 million) and DVD (\$110 million) generating over \$1 billion within eight months of its release. The movie premiered in Tokyo, and its release was part of a global marketing campaign in which over 40% of its worldwide theatrical revenues were realized in its

opening weekend, when literally dozens of different versions of the story/game debuted on Sony's PS3, Microsoft's Xbox 360, Nintendo's Wii and DS systems, et al. Spider-Man 3's DVD release in October was equally strategic in terms of Sony's concurrent Blu-ray DVD campaign, which went into high gear at year's end in its (successful) effort to oust Toshiba's competing HD DVD format. Sony also bundled HD discs of Spider-Man 3 with both its new HD PS3 game console (as well as its Blu-ray DVD player).

Sony's Spider-Man franchise is just one component of a global campaign whose ultimate impact promises to be far greater in terms of television, video ("home" or otherwise), PC and gaming than in terms of cinema. Consider, for instance:

- the recent release of Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, a new videogame installment rife with "cinematics" and linear narrative sequences that was developed exclusively for the PS3 (Blue-ray, HD) game platform;
- Sony's redesign of its PlayStation console to play HD movies and deliver Internet movie downloads (in HD);
- Sony's new line of Bravia HD TV sets equipped with an "Internet video link" to facilitate VOD (video on demand), which has long been the holy grail of the digital era.

Consumers will determine which of these (and other) technological innovations succeed, but clearly Sony is exercising enormous impact on the consumption and indeed the very nature of narrative entertainment in the home, and in the process is redefining what we still term "television."