

Convergent Sport Culture: Mediating the Game

Lindsay H. Garrison

X Games, *Next X*, and X-clusives: Negotiating Brand Equity in Disney's Wide World of "Action Sports"

While we often think of "convergence" primarily as a characteristic of our current media landscape, it's important to note that sport is really one place where convergence has long been at work. From the sports arena to radio, television, and print coverage to stats, cards, and collectibles, transmedia engagement is nothing new to sports teams, fans and audiences. In this current climate of corporate conglomeration (not only in the media, but a wide variety of industrial sectors), the passionate, multi-platform practice of sports culture is of particular significance in regards to cross-promotion, content repurposing, and other strategies that can maximize efficiencies across an integrated company. However, the relationship between sport, industry, and audiences isn't always so easy. I want to look at one example where a particular sports culture becomes a key site for understanding the advantages and limitations of conglomeration in the tensions between segmentation, subsidiaries, and a coherent corporate brand.

The Walt Disney Co., a company some might call the king of synergy, turned to sports as a major part of the company's expansion strategy of the 1990s; along with taking majority ownership in ESPN as a result of its 1996 acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC, Disney also added the extensive event-ready Wide World of Sports complex to its Orlando resort in 1997. In the same decade, Disney founded/purchased two professional sports franchises -the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim in 1993 and the Anaheim Angels in 1997, both of which were tied heavily to Disney feature films, the California-based Disney theme parks, and the corporate Disney brand. This ownership synergy was relatively short-lived, however: Disney recently sold its ownership stakes in both the Angels and the Ducks. But there is one place that the company retains a significant ownership interest in professional sports: the X Games.

Founded by ESPN in 1995 (a year before the Disney/Capital Cities merger), the "Extreme Games" brought together various special interest sports like skateboarding, mountain biking, and motocross in a multi-day live event of medal-winning and record-breaking. Actively cultivating a certain attitude of risk-taking, limit-pushing, gravity-defying "extreme" youthful American masculinity, the X Games in many ways fit part and parcel with the economic growth, abundant optimism, and the college-kids-turned-dot-com-millionaires of the late 1990s. Since then, the X Games have become a considerable revenue generator for ESPN (and Disney) domestically and abroad. But the X Games remained largely separate from the corporate Disney brand, in stark contrast to the conglomerate's highly integrated efforts with the Angels and the Ducks. One can infer a handful of reasons - a perceived imperative of allowing ESPN (which is technically still a joint venture with Hearst) to remain an independently branded subsidiary, or perhaps the potential dissonance between the subcultural politics of "action sports" and Disney's traditional family friendly brand.¹ In 2009, however, Disney turned

¹ For example, skateboarding as a subcultural practice carries certain anti-establishment politics, especially in street skating, where young people were (and still are) continually at odds with the police, local

to the X Games' independent brand equity to at once target a specific audience segment and unify its larger conglomerate properties.

An attempt to build on the huge success of its existing cable presence among tween girls and “hyper-target” 9-14 year old boys, spin-off cable channel Disney XD draws on many watered-down versions of the “extreme” young masculinity present in the X Games and action sports. This is particularly evident in its original programs like *Kick-Buttowski: Suburban Daredevil*, *Zeke and Luther* (whose motto is “skate or die”), and of course, the action sports reality competition show, *Next X*. *Next X* features “real life” tween boys training with various X Games medal winners and competing to win an exhibition spot in next year's X Games event. On top of fostering the crossover appeal of athlete celebrities and the extension of the X Games brand year round,² *Next X* notably allows for the mutual branding of ESPN, the X Games, and Disney. In addition, *Next X* taps in to the multi-platform practice of sport culture to extend content across outlets and unify brands across the conglomerate's various holdings. This is particularly key for Disney's interactive and television groups, where *Next X* and associated specials drive a wide array of “X-clusives” - including clips, interviews, athlete profiles, games, and quizzes – that are all co-branded with ESPN, X Games, and Disney across the conglomerate's various cable channels and online destinations.

After abandoning synergistic efforts with “traditional” sports franchises in baseball and hockey, the “extreme” attitude of action sports seems to be key to Disney's contemporary strategies. Why is this the case? What can this tell us about cultural concepts of youth and masculinity? It certainly appears that the rebellious attitude, individualism, and the political edge of extreme sports play a key role here. It is clear that certain resistant values of action sports, along with the transmedia enthusiasm of sports fan culture, are being adapted in attempts to both appeal to a particular audience segment (tween boys) and balance a larger conglomerate brand. I want to be careful, however, to avoid dismissing the engagement and meaning tween boys may find for themselves in skateboarding, *Next X* or online X-clusives. What tensions are at work in this configuration, and what can it tell us about industrial contexts and cultural practices in this particular historical moments?

governments, and business owners over the their right to transform public space into skating grounds. Skating was/is also often loosely tied to other resistant cultural practices of working class youth like punk rock (the likes of which have been studied in depth by scholars like Dick Hebdige).

² As opposed to the bi-annual events held every year, *Next X* extends the X Games brand to the off seasons of fall and spring.