



The Road to Pandora

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I'm wary of anyone who claims to know the future of anything. But I am also aware that it is in our innermost nature to be fascinated with the topic. What will happen tomorrow? What will happen in the next scene? The next chapter? What new gadget, formula, ideology or artistic vision is waiting around the next chronological corner that will have the power to change or destroy everything for us?

For those who work in advertising, simply being fascinated with the future isn't enough. We have to glean insight from it and process it and wrap it up in a bright shiny message that sells this incrementally better future to the rest of the human race (or, at the very least, our target market), brought to you on behalf of Brand X. For more than 20 years, I foretold a better future on behalf of everything from global telecommunications and technology companies to financial institutions, petrochemical conglomerates and the New York Yankees.

Of course, this has never been an easy task. But today, for a number of reasons, advertising the future—and the future of advertising—are more difficult and complicated propositions than ever. Today, not only do advertising people have to fully understand and market the past, present and future of their brands, they must have a thorough grasp of the seemingly infinite changes that are shaping the future of their industry. This includes everything from the rapidly evolving media landscape, to the constant emergence of new messaging delivery vehicles and the very ways in which creative and strategic ideas are developed, shared and created anew.

When I started in advertising, I used to think of certain companies (telecom, tech, finance, insurance) as “Tomorrow Brands” and most others (fast food, packaged goods) as “Today Brands.” For instance, a large part of the message for two brands on which I served as creative director—AT&T and Citibank—was to convince consumers and stockholders that they were tomorrow brands, with short and long-term visions, and worth partnering and doing business with for an extended period of time. As creative director on KFC, it was all about instant gratification—selling more chicken this very second. But now it’s more complicated. Today, every brand is a today brand and a tomorrow brand.

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The Beginning of Everything

Our fascination with the future is directly linked to our fascination with death.

Every time we wonder what's next, we're also wondering "When is it going to end? When is this feeling or trend or industry going to die?" For the past several years, advertising's fascination with death has come close to eclipsing its fascination with the possibilities of the future. For some agencies and brands, it has been their undoing.

Every day, we are bombarded with articles that foretell the death of something, and more often than not, directly or indirectly, the soon-to-be-dead medium is directly related to advertising: network television, newspapers, magazines, radio, the auto industry, the hardcover book, the novel, the music industry and, of course, advertising itself. And since advertising includes aspects of all of the above, it is subjected to rumors of dying multiple and incremental deaths—from print and radio ads to the much heralded, yet still pending death of the thirty-second television spot.

This obsession with the death of media and advertising has one major flaw; It fails to recognize or take into account the tremendously robust and diverse innovations that are taking place in each of the aforementioned mediums, often as a result of—or in anticipation of—the death of an older way. Turmoil, uncertainty and the practical, inevitable depreciation of legacy technologies can render an industry obsolete, or it can spark a creative and innovation revolution within that industry—one that often transcends it.

While change does indeed crush companies, careers, long-held perceptions and ways of life, it also creates entire universes of new opportunity. Some shrink from it and drift out into the void, and others embrace it. As Benjamin Palmer, CEO/Owner at the creative agency Barbarian Group, told me, "Some people are freaked out by the change and chaos that's overwhelming the industry. But we love it. We thrive on it."

I believe that the death of anything is the beginning of everything, and in my travels over the past 12 months doing research for a book about the future of entertainment and branding, I've discovered much that brands, marketers and fans of entertainment innovation should be excited about.

It's folly to predict the future. Indeed, my 2006 novel *The Futurist* makes a mockery out of anyone who claims to know absolutely what's next. But, by taking a closer look at some of the fascinating things that are now emerging, not just in advertising but in all mediums (because to ignore the ever changing relationship of mediums and technology is to ignore the future), we can make the most of the moment and be better prepared for advertising yet to come.

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3-D Entertainment is Still One-way Entertainment

Like millions of people around the world, I thought that James Cameron's 2009 film, *Avatar*, was a game-changer. But, unlike many, I didn't think it was because of the film's spectacular 3-D pyrotechnics. Despite the fact that the film prompted thousands of theaters around the world to install state of the art 3-D technology, and that it broke every box office record, I couldn't call it a game-changer because I'd seen countless 3-D films before and my movie-going experience for *Avatar* was essentially the same as it has always been. I bought my overpriced popcorn, took a seat and let the film entertain me. I didn't interact with the content or ingest it differently. I didn't have a say in the outcome or experience it in a radically new way. Even the marketing for *Avatar*, while ubiquitous, was traditional compared to the immersive campaigns for content such as *The Dark Knight*, *True Blood* or *Lost*.

But Cameron buried a clue into the film itself that speaks volumes about the game-changing future of entertainment, media and, yes, branding. For the four readers who might not have seen it, *Avatar* introduces us to Jake Sully, recruited to be part of shady mining operation on the planet of Pandora in the Alpha Centauri star system. Because the environment of Pandora is toxic to humans, the only way for Sully to fully experience his surroundings is to be placed into a sort of teleport chamber that's essentially the most kick ass, massively immersive, multi-player Alternate Reality Game (ARG) ever. Inside the port, Jake Sully is transported to Pandora in the body of native Pandoran, and interacts with others in ways that not only approaches, but transcends the verisimilitude of life.

Cameron's vision of Jake Sully's complete physical and psychological immersion into Pandora via an avatar is the real game-changer in *Avatar*. As I continue my travels, immersed in the undoable task of chronicling the future of entertainment, I become more convinced each day that this is where we're heading. That chamber in *Avatar* is the tease of a world where—in entertainment and branding—we'll one day, for better or worse, be able to walk through a door and find ourselves in our own version of Pandora.

When? Who knows? But creators, producers and executives everywhere I've visited, in advertising, TV, motion pictures, gaming, music and publishing, all seem to be working on their own version of the Road to Pandora. So, while this version of entertainment yet to come may sound crazy, it's hard to ignore the rate of innovation in our industry: from MySpace and Facebook to Foursquare and Tumblr seemingly in months. When I wrote the last line of *Adland*, my book about the past, present and future of advertising, I'd never even heard of Twitter. Within weeks of publication, I found it to be a more valuable marketing tool than a review in *The New York Times*.

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From Persuasion to Pandora.

In the 1960s Madison Avenue era, advertisers could buy a fixed block of time and be guaranteed a fixed audience. Advertising work from this era has been dubbed “the art of persuasion,” but with a captive audience, the persuasion was about as subtle as a sledgehammer. Now, if for some reason we find a commercial irritating or offensive, we have options. We can zap, TiVo or DVR it into oblivion. If it’s really offensive or fake, dangerous or untruthful, we can launch a (social) media campaign of our own renouncing the brand. On the other hand, if we’re entertained or engaged enough, if marketers are thinking in terms of consumer commitments and not campaigns (as HBO has done with True Blood and its Imagine brand campaign, which fused real and fictional worlds across multiple platforms, or what Red Bull did with Shaun White’s secret Project X half-pipe during the Winter Olympics), consumers will become a brand’s champion and partner, engage with it, share and sometimes even remix its message. And it doesn’t even have to be multi-layered. Engagement can be as simple as a utility-based app (as Zippo did with its iPhone concert lighter app).

In less than 50 years, we’ve gone from persuasion to engagement to utility, and a world in which new platforms and new gadgets seem to pop up every day. Some brands and creators are overwhelmed by this ubiquity of gadgets and exponentially growing multitude of platforms. Others are embracing the possibilities.

Transmedia Symphony.

I recently talked with Dan Pink (the bestselling author of Drive) about what I have been working on, and he had an interesting reply. He said that we were a generation raised on one or two instruments, while the children of this generation will have a multitude of instruments at their disposal and, some day, will begin to make great art from it all—a transmedia symphony. I'm with Dan. I think we're in the early stages of a creative revolution for entertainment (and, by extension, branding). And I believe that innovations in the way we create, shape and activate our stories will be at the heart of it. How effectively we tell our stories in this new environment is becoming one of the most vital life and marketing skills of our time.

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Greetings from the Nincompoop Forest.

Back in 1996, I worked at NW Ayer—the oldest ad agency in the US. I was a 35 year-old, golden-boy Creative Director running part of the AT&T business. The agency was not doing well, so we hired a new Creative Director for the agency, a west coast legend named Mark Fenske. On his first day, Fenske—who stood about six foot six—gathered the entire creative department and told us in his deep booming voiceover voice: “You are all lost in the Nincompoop Forest. And I’m here to lead you out.”

My first thought was “Oh. My. God. Our new boss is a raging megalomaniac.” But my second thought was “Okay... cool.” Because I soon found out that Fenske’s contention was that we were wizards, creators of high art and complex, enthralling brand landscapes I created some of my best work during his short stay and learned more about art and craft than I had in any other agency or creative writing program. But, in 1996, his plan failed miserably. Wrong clients, wrong agency, and the wrong kinds of stories to tell on the platforms we had. Advertising is a tough business. And now, as the line between entertainment and branding blurs more every day and platforms emerge that can accommodate every form of narrative, marketers have to be more than wizards. Now we find ourselves charged with creating and managing entire brand universes... which I think is absolutely awesome.

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Once Upon the Time Will Never Be the Same

This all came blindingly together for me during a recent trip to Los Angeles. I was in town to attend a conference called Transmedia Hollywood, put on by the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts and UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television. I was also in town for to present an ad campaign I'd done as a brand consultant, and to meet with several television network producers about a television show I'd created. And the thing that struck me is that, wherever I went, I seemed to be having different versions of the same meeting. The TV people were interested in crossing platforms to integrate advertising content. My advertising client was interested in creating original-content Webisodes on behalf of their brand, and the Transmedia Conference (which featured academics, TV and film executives, video game creators and principals from transmedia and narrative branding companies such as Campfire and 42 Entertainment) all but confirmed my Road to Pandora theory.

Here's what I've learned: The worlds of branding and entertainment have increasingly similar creative and commercial goals and challenges. And not only are each trying to deliver a more immersive experience for their audience, they are trying to seamlessly integrate it across multiple media platforms via an increasing number of gadgets. Sounds easy enough, but to accomplish this requires an altogether different approach to branding, and a greatly expanded agency and personal skill set.

Let's start with the creators. It's nice to think you can do it all, but in a transmedia, universe-building world, that's just not true. No longer do we work exclusively in the fixed time and space of 30 seconds or one page, or seven words or less on a billboard. Now we also need to master a universe in which stories spin out over time and leap back and forth across platforms. Now the brand narratives we create are both linear and non-linear, of unlimited times and lengths. This type of branding is as different from single platform branding as Haiku is from a series of epic novels, a single pop song from a concert tour, or a situational comedy from a movie franchise. It's unreasonable to think that one creator can do everything in a next generation, major transmedia advertising effort.

Choreographing the Brand Ballet

“In this new dynamic, soloists don’t play well,” explains Massimo Martinotti, owner of the transmedia branding company Mia Films. “With transmedia, the star system where a Director or Creative Director rules, won’t work. This is the end of total control.” Now it’s not uncommon for an agency to bring in screenwriters, designers, live events specialists and bloggers to work on behalf of a branding campaign that can extend and criss-cross up to 20 separate platforms.

To tell and sequence a brand narrative with this many players, layers and platforms requires an extraordinary amount of creativity, strategic thinking, and orchestration.

Planning a transmedia effort for a brand is not unlike the Show Bible that network television creators present during the early stages of their pitch to executives. A Show Bible contains all the major storylines and characters that will appear in its first several years on the air. It contains the show’s mythology and ethos, as well as a set of structural and visual rules that will be consistent throughout the show’s on-air life. What happens first? Next? How will other platforms interact with the story? How will you deal with fandoms, remixers and spoilers? How does this platform or this transmedia effort fit into your brand’s past, present and future narrative? These questions all hold true for transmedia branding.

One of the most important branding questions of the next 10 years will be “Who’s the keeper of your brand narrative?”

Who's the curator for your brand?

There was an interesting article in *Wired* magazine recently about a man named Leland Chee. Chee is the leading expert on all things Star Wars, and has the official title of Continuity Database Administrator for Lucasfilm. His job is to keep track of the Show Bible for not just the six live-action Star Wars movies, but also cartoons, TV specials, scores of videogames and reference books, and hundreds of novels and comics. As brands use more partners across more platforms, I suspect we'll see the emergence of many more in-house versions of Leland Chee.

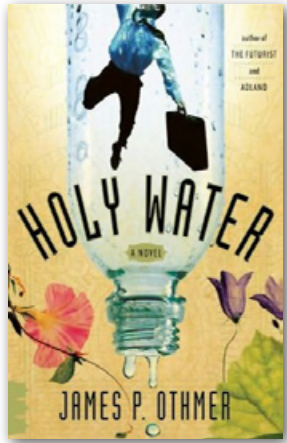
Now, when I first speak with clients as a consultant, I ask "What's the Show Bible for your brand?" What is your mythology and ethos? What role does your consumer play in your brand narrative? Is your narrative vivid and continuous? Who preaches it to your partners?

One of the most important branding questions of the next 10 years will be "Who's the keeper of your brand narrative?" Is it the Chief Marketing Officer who changes jobs, on average, every 18 months? Is it the strategic planner at one of your seven partner agencies? A retainer-based consultant? A bi-polar social media fanatic who lives in his mother's basement?

It's an important question to ponder and wrestle with on the Road to Pandora.

And, as we continue down the road toward Pandora (and I continue talking to game creators and film makers, TV and video game producers, publishers and marketers), I can't help but wonder if the culture industry of the future will be run by brands or media conglomerates, or even by multi-national corporations. (Or, for that matter, if there will be a difference between them.) And more importantly: How can you and I, as independent creators and consumers of culture, help direct that future, construct that narrative ourselves and pave the road to Pandora? 📍

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