

The Challenges and Prospects of the Transformers Film Series

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Abstract: Currently, more and more IPs are being adapted for film and television, such as Marvel's superhero series sweeping the world. Yet one of the hottest products of the last century, Transformers, has been declining in box office and reviews for its live-action films. This study will analyze the problems of this IP adaptation project based on the deteriorating status of the Transformers live-action movie, using a documentary research method, and propose corresponding solutions. Due to the challenges of commercialization, the Transformers live-action movie faces the challenges of losing audiences due to the disconnect with the times and its own lack of excellence to attract audiences. Hasbro can try to explore the game market or follow the example of Marvel and other IP to open a new story, so as to comfortably deal with the commercialization challenges. This study concludes that taking the IP Transformers as an example, IPs tend to fall into the trap of over-commercialization when adapting live-action movies, which ultimately leads to a lack of artistry in the movies themselves.

Keywords: transformers, live-action movies, IP adaptations, commercialization

1. Introduction

In recent years, various cultural and entertainment fields around the world, such as film and television, animation, games, literature, etc., have started to develop and blossom comprehensively, and have learned to integrate and thus have the concept of pan-entertainment, based on the symbiosis of the Internet and mobile Internet in multiple fields, with IP as the core, to carry out cross-field and cross-platform derivative industry chain. In this industry chain, the top end of the platform generates high-quality IP, then the IP content industry (movies, TV series, variety shows, performances, etc.) effectively expands the influence and number of IP fans, and finally the derivatives industry, which is currently one of the important channels for IP cash and the main way to maximize the economic value of IP. When it comes to world famous IP projects, it is impossible to ignore Transformers, its animated versions and live-action movies. After the Transformers animation sank in the United States and Japan in turn, the live-action version of the movie came out of nowhere to give the IP a very high income. The Transformers live-action movies made the toys sell again, and the fifth live-action movie suffered an all-time low at the box office on the tenth anniversary of its release, resulting in the entire series being cut down. Transformers live-action movies with its excellent visual effects and action scenes attracted a large audience, the first live-action movie released when the world once again hung up the Transformers toy craze. Although the

movie plot homogenization is serious, but did not affect the box office of the first four films. However, all the hidden problems in the fifth part of the concentrated outbreak, the advantages of the first few parts, the shocking action scenes also become its shortcomings. So far the Transformers live-action movie has not been a new work, Transformers also gradually become the memories of the middle-aged group. The problems of the Transformers series are the most typical problems of special effects blockbusters: the emphasis on special effects over plot; and the problems of most IP movies: how to establish a logical worldview and how to attract new audiences. Current research in China related to Transformers has focused on Hasbro's marketing strategy, the history of Transformers and the narrative approach of the Transformers live-action films. However, studies that analyze the entire Transformers franchise and make recommendations and summaries on a macro level are still to be developed, and this study was created to fill this gap. This article will analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the Transformers live-action movies from various aspects and make suggestions for improvement. Why the Transformers live-action movie gradually failed will become a lesson for other IPs facing commercialization challenges. The research method of this paper is literature analysis method.

2. Introduction to the Current Situation of Movies

Transformers is an American science fiction action film series based on the Transformers brand series that originated in the 1980s [1]. The purpose of making a live-action movie is threefold. The first is the film company to use the mature IP for profit, and break through the limitations of the age and audience of the cartoon, to extend the life of the mature IP; the second is Hasbro can rely on the sale of toys to make a lot of money, each film will have a new character or a new image of the old character, so there are new toys, Lego also uses this profit; the third is to create more derivative products, the image of the characters in the film to bring into the theme park, forming an industrial chain [2]. However, the Transformers movie is a subsidiary of its toys, which will lead to every movie being in the service of commercialization, thus dooming the IP in the film and television will encounter the problem of excessive commercialization.

Transformers, released in 2007, received mostly positive reviews, grossing \$709 million at the global box office and a moderate 57 percent on Rotten Tomatoes. Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen, released two years later, grew by more than \$100 million at the box office, but word of mouth plummeted, with a Rotten Tomatoes score of only 19 percent. The next five years saw the release of Transformers: Dark of the Moon and Transformers: Age of Extinction, which both grossed more than \$1 billion at the box office, but its high box office was not matched by its reputation, with the third film scoring 35% on Rotten Tomatoes and the fourth returning to its previous level of 18%. Transformers: The Last Knight, released in 2017, was the final film in the series. It collected \$431.7 million at the global box office and received negative reviews, getting the lowest rating on Rotten Tomatoes - 15% - and it was reported that the film was the last in the series to be directed by Michael Bay, and that the series will seek a new director for future follow-ups [3]. As seen in this, the audience is quite forgiving of Transformers live-action movies, because although the first four have poor word-of-mouth, but the box office is still very high. However, the director and the film makers did not improve the problems in the movie in a timely manner and only focused on making money with the next work. It is worth noting that the production cycle of Transformers movies is very stable, with each one taking 2-3 years. Considering that all five Transformers films were directed by the same director - Michael Bay - such high efficiency actually reflects that the scripts of the films are assembly-line works, and Rotten Tomatoes scores confirm that the Transformers stories are very rough. The purpose of this is to make the Transformers toys update their image and sell them as soon as possible so as to earn as much money as possible in a short period of time, which is over-commercialization. Instead of bringing in more profits, over-

commercialization has led to a decline in the reputation of this IP and a loss of audience. Lower box office and ratings lead to difficulty in shooting subsequent works, and the lack of logic in the story leads to the sequel's story becoming more and more difficult to be logical, and eventually fading out of public view.

The challenges encountered by the live-action Transformers movies can be broadly divided into external and internal reasons. The external reasons can be attributed to the issues of the times, while the internal reasons focus on the content of the movie itself.

3. Problems Analysis of Marvel's Movies

3.1. Failure to Locate the Audience Accurately

The first problem is that the film makers did not find a good position in the audience of different age groups. Almost 40 years have passed since Hasbro and Tegral began working together on the Transformers toy line in 1984. This has led to a large age gap in the audience for the Transformers movie series. The age of many older viewers has made them less enthusiastic about Transformers, while newer viewers know less about them. The plot of Transformers movies is relatively simple, and the character images are flatter. Simply put, it is more suitable for children rather than adults to watch. In addition, the movie has very little characterization for the Transformers side, which makes it difficult for new viewers who have not seen the old version of the animation to understand the characters and thus love them. In fact, the film makers did not find the right audience positioning. For the old audience, such a movie is too childish; for the new audience, the movie will be more difficult to understand.

3.2. Insufficient Innovation Efforts

The second problem is that the film is not competitive enough at the moment. In the 40 years of Transformers' development, there have been so many works of the same type that this work is very commonplace and lacking in novelty for new audiences. Transformers is a soft science fiction work with robots and combat as the selling point, its own science fiction is not strong [4]. As an action film, with the development of cg technology, exciting fight scenes in the Marvel and DC series of films are very common and do not lose the fight between the robots. As a science fiction film, Transformers lacks science fiction and depth of thought. Although it is more popular than the Gundam series and EVa series in the world, box office revenues are higher, but both the plot and substance, are far from these two. So much so that Transformers cannot do as long as Gundam and EVa and maintain a good reputation. EVANGELION: 3.0+1.0 THRICE UPON A TIME", released in 2021, had an amazing 92% Rotten Tomatoes rating and won the Japan Film Academy Award for Best Animated Film in Japan. Gundam series latest finished work "Mobile Suit Gundam: Iron-Blooded Orphans" by the well-known Japanese magazine "Animage" was selected as ANIME GRAND-PRIX 39th annual best animation awards first. On the contrary, the Transformers movie, only high box office, but received six nominations for the Golden Age Awards. It can be said that the story of Transformers led the trend of robot fighting, but without a clear enough audience positioning and sufficient innovation, it gradually lost its leadership in science fiction action films.

The time factor makes Transformers ordinary, but the live-action movie for this IP to cause devastating effects of the factors is the bad movie plot, plot holes in the plot cheesy, the cart before the horse, self-contradictory.

3.3. The Story is Not Excellent Enough

The third problem is that the plot of the movie is too single and childish. As mentioned above the Transformers plot is very simple, each one can be summarized as the Decepticons want to invade Earth & humans do not support Optimus Prime's righteous actions & Optimus Prime and his human friends successfully defeated the Decepticons [5]. There is no need for this series to exist except for the first one, because each one is creating a similar plot without enough innovation. Even older viewers will be bored with similar stories, let alone young viewers who grew up on science fiction stories. Both Marvel and DC's superhero movies have focused their stories on the human aspect, while Transformers is still stuck in what was popular 40 years ago, a simple good versus evil.

3.4. The Logic of the Movie Plot is Flawed

The movie only focuses on the action scenes, but ignores the content of the story. All the action movies represented by the Transformers series rely on special effects to make up the action scenes to attract the audience, and it can be said that the action scenes determine the lower limit of such movies [6]. No matter what movie, action scenes should serve the story. But in Transformers, over-commercialization has led to every movie in the series where the story serves the action scenes, so much so that there are many unjustified battles and conflicts that should not be there. The movie should not just show the special effects technology, the action scenes determine the lower limit of the movie, while the story content determines the upper limit of the movie [7].

The movie plot is very illogical. Transformers live-action movies, both positive characters and villainous characters, many have experienced death and resurrection. In order to have an appealing ending, the character needs to die, and in order to make a sequel, the character needs to be resurrected. However, the deaths are meaningless and will not touch the audience because of the dead characters are destined to be resurrected. This actually reflects a more serious problem, that is, the director keeps overturning the last one for commercialization and for the next movie. In order to make the next new movie, the director not only needs to resurrect the dead villain, but also needs to create new contradictions, so each movie will appear in the previous one in the set-up does not exist, and unjustifiable contradictions. In other words, all the logic exists only in the latest one, and the whole series lacks complete logic.

3.5. The Role of the Film Image and Animation Differences

In addition to the hard-hitting plot logic, there are some equally important, conceptual problems. One is that the shaping of the characters is very different from the earliest animated versions, which were taken directly from the toys. It is worth noting that the Transformers toys are not derivatives of the movie or the animation. In fact, the animation and the movie were created for the toys. In other words, the image of the toys is the basis. The image design in the movie makes it difficult for the audience to connect the characters with their memories. In the fourth and fifth films, the Transformers' bodies are closer to human shapes, which deviates from the core concept of "robot". Therefore, there is a lot of controversy in the old fans, and there is a certain degree of negative impact. Another is that, although the cg technology is more developed, but the Decepticons deformation process is simpler. The movie uses "machine form into pieces and then into human form" instead of "machine transformation into human form" this core concept. Finally, the role of shaping, which is the worst shape is Optimus Prime. Optimus Prime is not a truck that can turn into a robot, but an alien that can turn into a truck. However, his words and actions are the most lack character and emotion. The so-called character, that is, only he can do this thing and others cannot; the so-called emotion, that can only do this thing here and now and not in other situations. In the movie, Optimus Prime can abandon his companions for the sake of unknown humans, and has been

without reason, no complaints for human fighting, always righteous and brave, which is very illogical. Because it means that the director did not treat him as a leader from an alien planet, but just a truck fighting for mankind.

4. Suggestions

The Transformers franchise is flawless in terms of publicity and visual effects, action scenes and music. To promote the films well, Hasbro has signed agreements with more than 200 companies in over 70 countries. The first three Transformers movies were nominated three times for the Academy Award for sound effects and twice for the Academy Award for sound effects editing and visual effects, respectively. But because the negative impact of the failure of Transformers 5: The Last Knight on the series as a whole was huge and irreversible, no matter what efforts were made in terms of sequels, it was not going to help. The scheduled shooting of Transformers 6 was also delayed indefinitely. However, for the Transformers IP, not completely no way out.

4.1. Develop Game Market

Hasbro can change its strategy and vigorously develop the hottest game market of the moment. For external issues of the times, the story in the Transformers movie does seem outdated today, but the movie is not the only way to promote the toy. Hasbro can be in the development of existing game market. Video games are undoubtedly one of the most popular forms of entertainment today, many IP, such as Marvel, DC, Disney have a place in the game market. Transformers is no exception, but the launch of the game are accompanied by the movie on sale. This leads to the plot of the game will eventually be limited by the film, on the other hand, Transformers has the game play is relatively single third-person shooter. Whether it is the volume or the degree of completion, Transformers games are difficult to compare with the real 3A masterpiece, because they are only an accessory to the film. Transformers last game was released in 2015, from 2015 to now, there are enough changes and developments in action game genres and gameplay, such as fighting, parkour, roguelike, and even text adventure, puzzle solving, and romance elements. Hasbro can launch a Transformers game that can be called a 3A masterpiece, with its original appeal and the younger generation's love for video games, it can definitely be used to reshape the value of Transformers IP in the gaming world, thus driving the launch of new movies and ultimately driving overall revenue.

4.2. Start a Totally New Story

Hasbro can follow the example of other successful IPs and open up new worldviews and stories. For internal plot issues, Paramount Pictures took the step of canceling the original Transformers 6 shoot in favor of appointing a new director and cast to produce an entirely new story. 2018's release of the outlier Bumblebee was well received, with a Rotten Tomatoes score of 74%, leading the studio to decide to start the Transformers prequel story line with Bumblebee. This is exactly the right way for Transformers to be reborn. Long before the live-action movie was released, Transformers already had a number of well-received animated and comic book versions, such as Transformers: Beast Wars, Transformers: Rescue Bots and Transformers: Prime. Each anime or manga has a separate worldview and does not interfere with each other. This allows badly received works not to affect the good ones, and the good ones to become the highlight of the whole IP. So Hasbro can, on the one hand, strengthen the promotion of its latest animation Transformers: War for Cybertron Trilogy, relying on the animation to improve overall word of mouth and attract new viewers, ultimately increasing the number of movie viewers. On the other hand, the current strategy should be maintained, focusing on new storylines, by telling stories from before the 21st century or

before coming to Earth, to complete the entire universe, as Marvel has done many times with the release of Spider-Man [8-10].

5. Conclusion

All in all, the live-action Transformers movie failed at both the word-of-mouth and box office in 2017 because the stale story had failed to keep up with the new era and the movie's content was poor, and the root cause of all this was over-commercialization. In order to solve the current dilemma, Hasbro should find the right audience positioning, open an independent universe and explore the games and animation market while maintaining its strengths. The failure of the Transformers movie reflects the plight of toy-centered IP works in the last century, and provides a reference for all IP movies. For example, although Marvel's superhero movies are not currently suffering from similar failures as the Transformers movies, the Transformers movies, which also rely on action scenes and special effects, have flaws that are well worth avoiding if Marvel is unable to balance between plots and fight scenes.

The significance of this study is helping other IPs that have not yet been adapted into live-action movies or TV plays to avoid encountering similar problems. In addition, this study is useful to complement Chinese research on the once successful Transformers project.

This study has some objective limitations because it only focuses on the currently released Transformers live-action films, with less mention of their animated works from the last century and no prediction of their future release. Hopefully, future research can analyze and study all the derivative works of Transformers from a macro perspective, and draw more detailed and precise conclusions in conjunction with the newly released works of Transformers.

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