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Marketing and materiality in the popular music transmedia of Gorillaz' Plastic Beach

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Abstract

The entertainment complexes of narrative transmedia contain few instances based in popular music. However, those that exist provide intriguing case studies, highly distinct from those based in film and television. The most fully realized of these, Gorillaz' *Plastic Beach* (2010), is rich in visual media typical of popular music culture, including sleeve art, animated music videos. The tangible materiality foregrounded in these visuals stems from the main ecological theme of the album: the disposability of plastic waste. Using methods of analysis of the original texts, and a survey of the networked fan practices that respond to them, the essay theorizes that the material and haptic invitation in these visuals is at odds with the diminishing presence of physical consumables within popular music culture. It then argues that fans enter into this gap with their own creative practices, making and playing with hand-made or customized objects inspired by *Plastic Beach,* activating unexploited, marketing potential within the album. Although current applications of this research are limited due to the low frequency of popular music transmedia case studies, it points the way forward to theoretically more successful marketing strategies in the future.

Resumen

El entramado de entretenimiento hilado por las diversas narrativas de material transmedia contiene pocos ejemplos basados en la música popular. Sin embargo, los que existen proporcionan una interesante oportunidad para profundizar en las diferencias que éstos presentan frente a sus equivalentes en formato visual (cine, TV). Un ejemplo particularmente interesante es el de la banda Gorillaz y el álbum Plastic Beach (2010), rico en medios visuales típicos de la cultura de la música popular como son los dibujos y los videos musicales animados. La materialidad tangible de este ejemplo surge del principal tema de índole ecológica del álbum: el desecho de residuos plásticos. Utilizando métodos de análisis de los textos originales, y una encuesta de las prácticas de los aficionados, este ensayo teoriza sobre la posibilidad de una relación material y háptica con estos visuales; posibilidad que de algún modo se contradice con la actual tendencia de disminución de consumibles/formatos físicos en la música popular. Además, concluye que los seguidores de la banda interactúan con sus propias prácticas creativas, creando y jugando con objetos hechos a mano o personalizados inspirados en Plastic Beach, activando el potencial de comercialización que existe inexplotado en Plastic Beach. Aunque las aplicaciones actuales de esta investigación son limitadas debido a la baja frecuencia de ejemplos en la música popular transmedia, esto indica un posible camino a seguir, al menos teóricamente, en la elaboración de estrategias de marketing específicas para esta forma de creatividad.

1.1 Introduction

Transmedia, in the sense of complex narrative-based entertainment that flows across media and modes, is now the focus of a broad range of scholarship, covering popular narratives based in the entertainment worlds of film, television, books, computer games and even toys. Scholarship on the subject, from authors such as Marie-Laure Ryan and the two *Storyworlds* books she has edited (2004, 2014), occasionally acknowledges the roles that music can play within transmedia, but has so far not tackled examples of transmedia based in popular music. However, these are surprisingly rare, particularly where high profile examples are concerned. Aside from Gorillaz, who form the focus of this article, notable attempts at popular music transmedia include David Bowie's 'Nathan Adler' saga, which began in 1995 with the release of the *1.Outside* album; Nine Inch Nails' *Year Zero* (2007) was accompanied by an alternate reality game using websites, murals and pre-recorded phone messages that saw the narrative cross over into real life; The Residents' *Bad Day on the Midway* (1995) and *Bunny Boy* (2008) are examples of transmedia created by an experimental music group, where the main focus is on media other than the music (a CD-ROM game in the former, and a series of webisodes in the latter). I say 'attempts' at popular music transmedia, as many of these are characterized by plans for additional media (films, television series, books, theatrical shows, CD-ROMS) left unfulfilled by disinterest either on the part of the creators, or those funding their work. Nonetheless, the marketing of popular music transmedia is integral to the product itself, and often to the construction of narrative. Promotional devices such as music videos, interviews, comics and online games are important paratexts[1] that carry as much core content as the music does, often with far higher levels of narrativity than the music itself.

In the case study that forms the focus of this article, Gorillaz' third album *Plastic Beach*, the core themes and aesthetics of the project (materiality, artificiality, obsolescence and waste) are articulated through strong visual tropes that pervade the media as a whole. This is theorized here as a 'material invitation', demonstrated via several examples of enticing visual media created for the album campaign. This invitation contrasts markedly with the lack of actual physical consumables in the dematerialized popular music culture into which the album arrived in 2010. How Gorillaz' fans responded to this disjunct through their own practices - acts of creation, customization and play – is another area of investigation within this article, which may ultimately provide lessons about how a hypothetically stable production of popular music transmedia might be better marketed.

1.2. Background to the case study

Gorillaz, the brainchild of musician Damon Albarn and artist Jamie Hewlett, can in many ways already be considered an ongoing transmedia project based in popular music, with a semi-serialized story stretching back to 2000. The fictional nature of the cartoon band, transmitted to the audience via scripted interviews, virtual performances and the band's unique animated videos, has spawned few imitators, and certainly none on the same scale. This is partly due to the financial risks involved in producing and marketing complex entertainment media of this nature that, in an era of declining sales for recorded music, clearly make music industry investors, i.e. the major record labels, nervous.

Plastic Beach was Gorillaz' most ambitious album project (or in Gorillaz' terminology 'Ppase') to date, both in terms of the number of musical collaborators and the number and variety of media objects produced to aid the complex storytelling conceit. This conceit was described by Hewlett as:

> A movie that will never make it in to the cinema because it doesn't have to. It's just gonna be in everybody's heads. Because we'll give 'em enough visuals, enough sound, enough music to make up the story (The Making of Plastic Beach, 2010).

While the official budget for the project has never been made public, *Plastic Beach* was evidently an expensive record to produce and market. High costs were incurred for the studio recordings, with Albarn conducting recording sessions with three separate orchestras, one in the UK, one in Syria and one in Lebanon. Gorillaz' animated music videos, which carry a significant proportion of the storyline, also have very high price tags, with an estimated cost of £250,000 ($438,000) per clip (Byrne, quoted in Sexton, 2006). Furthermore, the more complex transmedia narrative (compared to other Gorillaz album releases) that Hewlett envisions in the quote above necessitated the commissioning of a host of other media objects. These included several free online games and a wealth of video material (variously described as idents, teasers, trailers, storyboard videos and tour visuals), involving elaborate model construction and animation using a range of techniques. *Plastic Beach* is largely perceived to have been a relative failure in the marketplace, with far lower sales than its predecessor *Demon Days* (2005). EMI's decision to pull the funding on significant further promotion beyond the six-month mark in the campaign was a factor in growing tensions between Albarn and Hewlett, culminating in a well-documented rift in their working and personal

relationship (Harris, 2010).

Central to both the music and storyline created for the album is an ecological theme, which reflects on man's relationship to his own waste, although this is dealt with in a more lighthearted way in the storyline. More specifically, the theme muses on what happens to discarded plastic, with its ultimate destination being massive gyres (whirlpools) within the Pacific Ocean where '...you'll find islands, some as big as the British Isles, made of plastic densely stuck together' (Albarn, in Paphides, 2010). Additionally, *Plastic Beach* is both a concept and a fictional place - an island that 'you can escape to, both a symptom of the problem and a sanctuary from it' (ibid.).

Key to Gorillaz' appeal, of course, are the four virtual band members (expanded to five for *Plastic Beach*) with whose cartoon personalities fans often identify. Such identification is evident in fan practices such as cosplay, fan art and the crafting of new Gorillaz narratives in the form of fan fiction and comics. These texts, which are often 'slashy' (homoerotic) in nature, may contribute to the 'fanon', a term widely used within the fan fiction vernacular that provides a means of accommodating unofficial and unsanctioned texts. These texts may 'acquire legitimacy within the fan community even though they may contest or be incompatible with canon elements' (Leavenworth, 2014, p.315). This suggests that the importance of fan activities for the storyworld as a whole can be seen as a dynamic, fluid process through which meanings of the originary texts are also constantly shaped and renegotiated. These kinds of fan behaviours are atypical for music fandom in general, and the fact that the Gorillaz fandom engages within such a wide range of creative practices can be largely attributed to the fictional nature of the band.

However, Gorillaz fans have historically also demonstrated a strong attachment to the locations and environments created for the band, such as their former base 'Kong Studios' and the floating island seen in the music videos for 'Feel Good Inc.' (2005) and 'El Manana' (2006). A compelling new setting with strong visual appeal was created for *Plastic Beach* - an island composed of aggregated junk in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This island (in both the fictional and real worlds) was sprayed pink and topped by a studio compound inspired by Tracey Island from the 1960s British puppet animation show Thunderbirds. As a work of popular music transmedia, the location of the island was key to making the *Plastic Beach* concept work. Navigable and playable versions of the island were also used in online video games and also became the main interface for the updated Gorillaz website. Finally, the island provides a powerful visual emblem of the theme of the album.

At the beginning of 2010, a new Gorillaz website (styled as a 'beachsite') was launched, which would provide a hub for a multimedia promotional campaign featuring games and competitions specific to the narrative. Via the website and a schedule of timed interviews, music and video releases, fragments of the narrative were to be drip-fed transmedially to the audience. However, rather like a treasure hunt, the majority of these media objects had to be sought out away from the main website. This modus operandi was in itself hardly new: from the start, Gorillaz had invited participation in their world through such fragmented sets of media. Part of the pleasure of Gorillaz fandom is in collecting information from various sources and trying to make connections between them and sense of the whole. Fan forums, such as those within the popular fan site Gorillaz-Unofficial, function as sorting houses for this information, where a huge volume of commentary is generated, often characterized by speculation and collective problem-solving. The narrative scope of the project had escalated for *Plastic Beach*, and greater narrative cohesion was clearly a major aim. Gorillaz' record label EMI/Parlophone committed substantial funding to the project in the hope that they would not only profit again through high album sales, but also from other ways of monetizing the project through the website and fan club.

Then-president of Parlophone Miles Leonard made grand claims for the project, exemplifying the intended scope, quoted in an article published shortly before the album's release in Music Week:

> GORILLAZ SWING BACK INTO ACTION on March 9 with their third studio album *Plastic Beach*, marking the start of an innovative 18-month multimedia campaign.

> Devised in partnership with merchandise and online specialists All Access Today, the site's subscription element will, according to Morrison, provide paying Gorillaz fans with exclusivity including access to online content, subscription-only live events, ticket priority and a toy – possibly a submarine, according to Morrison – designed by Hewlett.

> There are also plans to release a storybook, while games are in development and discussions ongoing from a number of brands. Morrison is also not writing off the possibility of a film.

> "EMI has invested a lot into Gorillaz but we feel it is worthwhile as there is more involved than simply releasing an album" says Leonard. "What we are in the process of developing with the Gorillaz team and Chris Morrison is a much broader picture. We have some fantastic ideas. With the music and

Jamie's images the spin-off potential is huge and the technology since the last album has progressed hugely, so the ideas of how we can take Gorillaz to a live audience are endless" (Barrett, 2010).

Ultimately, many of these stated plans were left unfulfilled; no book or film was ever produced and subscribers never received their toy. Likewise, an intention to follow through with a second year of promotion and possible follow-up album was stymied. This had serious implications for the narrative of the project, although, while there was certainly a 'narrative' for *Plastic Beach*, this was related to the audience in a mostly non-linear fashion, with story fragments placed within the games, artwork and videos. Additional story fragments were divulged in 'interviews' with the virtual band members - effectively scripts written by the band's unofficial third member Cass Browne and sometimes enacted for the media by voice actors. Where the story was easiest to follow was across the series of music videos, which used a mixed- media style of live action, 2D and 3D animation.

The first two of these, for the singles 'Stylo' and 'On Melancholy Hill', largely chronicle the band's journey to the island in separate stages. The 'Stylo' video is a car chase, where three of the band are pursued by a mysterious bounty hunter across a desert, in a style that is a close pastiche of scenes from the 1979 film *Mad Max*. At the end of the video, the car plunges into the ocean and morphs into a submarine, setting the stage for the sequel video, 'On Melancholy Hill'. In the sequel, which switches to an underwater setting, Gorillaz' shark-shaped submarine is joined by a flotilla of other submarines which ferry the musical collaborators (including Snoop Dogg, Lou Reed and Mick Jones and Paul Simonon of the Clash) to the island. During this video, the whereabouts of the two missing band members, Noodle and Russel, are also revealed. However, as the two videos revolve around the journey itself, story details are minimal and invite questions rather than provide explanations: what are the band escaping from? Who is the mysterious 'Boogeyman' who sublimates into an inky black cloud over the desert? Why are we seeing a cyborg version of the guitar player Noodle, and where is the real Noodle? The cryptic clues seeded in the videos are designed to keep followers of the project engaging with other media in order to find answers, although it became clear from commentary on fansites that a) the transmedia narrative had been chaotically designed with little continuity or consistence and that b) the more casual followers of the project were simply confused and therefore failed to engage strongly. At the point where funding ran out for the project, a storyboard for a video for a prospective third single 'Rhinestone Eyes' had been drafted, but was never produced in full animated form. When the storyboard appeared on Gorillaz' YouTube channel in lieu of the full video, it revealed a pay-off in story terms for the more minimal chronotopes of the journeys of 'Stylo' and 'On Melancholy Hill'. With all of the story protagonists having finally arrived at the island, they were now free to interact in a series of confrontations and battles that rewarded the investment made by the followers of the story until this point, or at least would have done if the video had been fully realised.

This focus on the visuals created for the project raises the issue of the role of the music in creating the narrative. As Gorillaz' lyrics are definitively not 'about' the characters in the narrative, nor do they refer to events that occur during the narrative, we are left with some questions around the ontology of popular music transmedia. If visual media allow these ideas to be expressed iconically, i.e. by bearing physical resemblance to what they represent and words (represented in music by lyrics) describe, then what is it that music contributes narratively? The music of *Plastic Beach* can only express elements of narrativity, (i.e. setting, event, character) by connotation: sounds may remind us of certain ideas, materials, gestures or spatio-temporal phenomena, yet cannot represent them directly. Nor is this aided by ongoing arguments (perhaps destined to persist forever) about what music can and cannot signify per se.

Additionally, there is another conundrum inherent in *Plastic Beach's* origination in popular music, if it is analysed as transmedia. As *Plastic Beach* is so rooted firmly within popular music, is the transmedial 'mothership' of the work therefore the album, i.e the object that forms the primary commercial product? If this is the case, then, why is it so reliant on other media types and modes to function *as* a transmedia narrative? While it is evident from YouTube comments trails that many casual fans are content simply to follow the videos on YouTube, the main focus of the media campaign of each Gorillaz 'phase' is the launch of each album. There are two authors that fans recognize for Gorillaz: Damon Albarn writing the music, and Jamie Hewlett providing the visuals. Although these two elements work comfortably enough together in providing a satisfying audiovisual experience, they do not combine seamlessly to provide the narrative experience. This is in clear contrast with transmedia properties rooted in books, films or television series (e.g. *Harry Potter, Star Wars, Lost*) where the primary text is inherently narrative. When transmedia is based in mothership texts operating in the more ludic modes of computer games or toys (e.g. *Warcraft* or *Transformers*), this relationship is muddled somewhat by the insistence of many ludologists that narrative should be sidelined in theorization within the discipline, as with Markku Eskelinen's now infamous statement 'if I throw a ball at you I don't expect to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories' (Eskelinen, 2001).

Yet when even the lyrics of the music within *Plastic Beach* refuse to narrate the story, can a piece of music

therefore be said to provide the mothership, i.e. the primary text, of the story? There are no completely satisfying answers to this question, yet fortunately popular music manages to sidestep many of the debates that plague traditional musicology. The music is never *intended* to signify by itself and is always embedded in a far wider textual system, where it is surrounded and supported by a variety of verbal and visual texts. These texts condition and embellish meanings nascent in the music, allowing analysis of popular music to become less problematic (if more complex) in ascribing meaning. The cancellation of the third music video for 'Rhinestone Eyes' conspired to frustrate the desires of fans for 'completion'. The result for the transmedia narrative was that it was left unresolved and largely open-ended. This lack of resolution acted as a driver for some very personal interpretations of the narrative's conclusion, articulated through various forms of fan creativity. However, given the observations above that music may not be central to the narrativity of *Plastic Beach,* it is perhaps not surprising that when fans attempted to continue or conclude the narrative, or round out the project more generally, it was not to the musical aspects that they turned.

Overall, then, the campaign around *Plastic Beach*, despite its many triumphs, can be characterized by a high degree of 'promise', with a far lower degree of 'delivery', an idea that will now be extended to include the materiality promised in its visual media. This idea forms the basis for the enquiry in the rest of the article, which looks at fannish responses across a variety of modes.

1.3 Artistic Traditions Around Recycled Materials

As a final piece of context to help understand where the intense materiality within the *Plastic Beach* project derives, it is useful here to offer some background on the increasingly popular fringe art practice of making art from recycled materials. This tradition has a history dating back to at least the 1960s with pioneers like Leo Sewell. Within the broader practice of recycled art, sculptural forms, photography and other images are shared widely online as well as being exhibited in galleries. Notable examples using plastic come from Robert Bradford's animal and toy sculptures, Tom Deiniger and Zac Freeman's collage portraits and Erika Iris Simmons' portraits of musicians made from cassette tape. As a subcategory within this, recycled art made from marine debris is a popular (and global) artistic practice, aiming to draw attention to the scale and long-term effects of marine pollution. Some of the more notable exponents here include Angela Haseltine Pozzi's 'Washed Ashore' project and Mandy Barker's photographic series *Penalty, Shoal, Soup* and *Snow Flurry*[2].

Marine recycled art in particular connects to the ecological phenomena that inspired *Plastic Beach* in obvious ways: Barker's *Soup* images, for example, make particular reference to the same North Pacific Gyre or 'garbage patch' that informs the setting of *Plastic Beach*. Recycled art encourages, even forces the viewer to deeply consider the materiality of the objects used, which are subject to very slow processes of biodegradation. There is an additional focus on the processes through which plastic objects move: raw material to industrial manufacture, commercial use to disposal as waste, an extended afterlife as marine debris and an eventual reclamation as art. Recycled art not only jumbles together heterogeneous sets of items, but orders them into aesthetically pleasing or recognizable combinations. Via this process, unwanted materials are recoded as useful, junk as beautiful, encouraging viewers to consider alternately the disposability and use value of consumed plastic objects.

One set of work has particular resonance with the design of *Plastic Beach*, that of artists Richard and Judith Selby Lang, which often uses toys salvaged from the California beaches and later sorted by type and colour. Indeed their online video 'One Plastic Beach' shares its name with the Gorillaz project. Aspects of the Langs' work, such as the detail from 'Soldier's Wreath' (Figure 1, below left) are strikingly similar to the most important piece of artwork created for *Plastic Beach* – the model of the island itself.

Figure 1: From L to R. 'Soldier's Wreath' by Richard and Judith Selby Lang; Still from The Making of Plastic Beach Documentary

Sources: Lang and Lang (2008); The Making of Plastic Beach (2010)

2. Methodology

The research in general approaches *Plastic Beach* as an example of a networked 'virtual world' (Boellstorff et. al, 2012), where 'online' or 'virtual community' is increasingly viewed as a highly fluid construct. Data collection was initially focused on the official texts, as disseminated through the band's website, YouTube channel and interviews in the music press. Additional ethnographic research was carried out during this stage through engagement with the fan site Gorillaz-Unofficial, which had become the de facto fan community due to the lack of fan forums on the official site.

In a second phase of research, data collection then intensified, broadening into an expanding archive of digital artefacts including those produced by fans, such as videos and digital drawings collected from a variety of websites. As I became more drawn to audiovisual fan responses evident on YouTube, the site began to play a more central role in data collection, and an archive of video captures was assembled. These later proved invaluable when certain videos were later withdrawn from circulation. YouTube's capacity to showcase both video and musical responses to Gorillaz made it a particularly rich source of data collection, in addition to providing a catch-all hub for many community types and creative practices. On other sites that formed important loci for research, such as DeviantArt, Flickr or cosplay.com, users can be characterised both as Gorillaz fans and also members of communities that gather around specific fan practices, such as cosplay, photography, fan art etc. No single Gorillaz 'fan community' is therefore imagined or described in keeping with Kozinets' 'liquidity of culture and interaction' (Kozinets, 2002: p 12).

Plastic Beach is in many senses a *place*, possessing 'worldness', which offers the 'object rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact' (Kibid., 2002: 11). The way that *Plastic Beach* is theorized here is as a networked and multi-user shared environment, which can be altered by users, as can happen to a limited extent with the narrative extensions of fan fiction, fan art and fan videos. Gorillaz fans were found to be diverse, including strong participation from both genders, a broad range of ages, and a large number of nationalities. However, given the sheer number of fan communities (and community types) encountered, a full gendered ethnographic study was beyond the scope of the research.

3. Results

Research questions for the next part of the article form three areas of inquiry. The first investigates the official texts to discern how the core themes and metaphors of *Plastic Beach* were articulated within its media objects. The second looks at how these objects were disseminated through various online channels, involving several novel methods of music marketing. The third question then addresses the fannish texts produced as responses, questioning how and why these were produced.

3.1 How are materiality, artificiality, obsolescence and waste articulated in Plastic Beach, and in Gorillaz products in general?

Unsurprisingly, the themes of *Plastic Beach* identified earlier were also strongly articulated in the artwork for the project, whose highly varied visual media objects share the project's thematic meditation on artificiality, disposability, and obsolescence. Some of the properties of these media objects, which create some of the conditions for fan media production, will now be parsed into four categories.

3.1.2 Toyeticity

Firstly, Gorillaz possess a 'toyetic' quality that invites the user to play and handle, connecting users to the pastimes and activities of childhood. The term toyetic, commonly used in the study of entertainment and play, refers to the suitability of media property for merchandising of licensed toys and games. These types of merchandise – action figures, backgrounds and props etc. – can generate 'collectability' and even encourage brand loyalty, although toyetic does not necessarily denote the negative connotations that come with the latter. This toyetic potential runs far deeper than Gorillaz simply being cartoon characters, and therefore having connections to the world of childhood and adolescence: the fecund, whimsical background detail in Hewlett's artwork frequently includes toys, as well as graffiti, fake products and other artist in-jokes. These details are one of the defining elements of Hewlett's style, from which his authorship can be recognized and fan pastiches of his style assembled. An obvious merchandising choice for Gorillaz was to produce a set of toys, and in 2005 a series of large Kidrobot vinyl figures were produced in limited quantities (initially 2,000). These were followed by another limited set of smaller 7-8 inch figures (called 'Gorillaz CMYK') the following year. Due to the limited release, these items are now rare, and a set of the four boxed CMYK figures was being traded for $500 on ebay at the time of writing. The toy planned for inclusion in the subscriber's package for *Plastic Beach*, as mentioned in the Music Week article, demonstrates that toy production was due to be continued in the new project.

3.1.2 Readiness for remediation

One of the earliest pieces of media made available on Youtube was the 'Orchestral Trailer', a two minute, twenty second video which filmed the island model in a giant circular water tank in Shepperton studios[3]. Images of the island were captured from a variety of angles and distances, allowing the viewer to explore the exterior of the environment comprehensively. Often, the camera would move close enough to the island to identify the aggregated junk from which it was formed. Although the film was made by simply filming a scale model, the results were so sophisticated that, ironically, many viewers thought it had been created via digital animation, testament to the slippage of materiality typical of many of *Plastic Beach's* media objects. The creation of a visually striking, explorable location was undoubtedly central to giving a compelling narrative world to *Plastic Beach*. This location was then conveyed to users on different platforms, and using different types of media specificity, i.e. drawings, videos, digital games, and the basic interface of the website. Within the 'beachsite', as the home website was renamed for the project, both the exterior and interior or the island could be explored. Prior to *Plastic Beach*, the interface was a similarly navigable version of their previous fictional base of operations, Kong Studios, to which many Gorillaz fans were very emotionally attached. Evidence can be found supporting Marie-Laure Ryan's observations about emotional attachment to locations within spatial immersion (2009: 54) on a YouTube thread under a video providing a 'tour' of Kong Studios (the visual hub for the previous version of Gorillaz' website). Years after the website was updated for *Plastic Beach*, the video receives comments from fans who talk wistfully about how they 'used to go to Kong everyday' (kody morris, 2012) and now lament its passing. Judging by the number of remediations drawn and constructed by fans that are evident on DeviantArt and YouTube, this is also the case for *Plastic Beach*.

3.1.3 Hapticity

There is a persistent focus on what the island, the most recognisable visual icon of the campaign, is composed of – mostly small plastic toys, particularly vehicles such as tanks and aeroplanes, which were glued together to build the model, before it was sprayed pink. The island beach, which looks smooth and inviting from a distance, is revealed in close-up to be spiky and uncomfortable, due to the hard protruding pieces of plastic that form the surface (see Figure 1). This not only highlights the materiality of the location, but implies a hapticity, where users are not simply invited to gaze on the objects depicted in the imagery, but to imagine what it might be like to step on them or handle them. Laura Marks makes the case for restoring the flow between the optical and the haptic that she feels is currently lacking in our culture (*Marks*,

2002: xiii). She shares the insistence of philosophers Deleuze and Guattari that these two modes are not separate and dichotomous, but 'slide into one another' (ibid.: xii). *Plastic Beach* provides an ideal field of investigation for this kind of enquiry on several fronts: firstly, everyday objects and materials are visualized in a heightened, hyperreal form that intensifies their material qualities. Secondly, the mixed-media approach used to create its visuals (particularly animation) focuses user attention on their (mixed) materiality. During the 1970s, Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer conducted significant experiments in tactile art, which heavily influenced his stop motion animation style. About touch, Švankmajer states that it 'can play an important role in overcoming the opposition of Object-Subject' (2014: 2). If this ideal were extended into the world of commercial art and entertainment, this role of 'overcoming' could well apply to the opposition of Art Consumer-Art Product. Here, touch can become an important agent in the dissolution of the consumption/production binary that fascinates so many fan scholars. The outcome of this is that users are primed to engage with and recreate the visual media of *Plastic Beach* in modes that hover strongly around the haptic. Frequently it feels as if these media objects are echoing the address of the book cover for *Prière de Toucher* ('Please Touch', 1947), a catalogue of surreal art on which Marcel Duchamp mounted a three-dimensional rubber sculpture of a breast, made from foam surrounded by black velvet. As with the book, *Plastic Beach* offers an invitation to touch that is something of a tease. Yet this tease keeps full consummation of the act of touch out of reach; what is promised for consumption is not offered up in reality. The media objects available for view or sale are largely delivered to users digitally, creating an acute haptic divide between object and user.

3.1.4 Corresponding low materiality in musical media

In keeping with this observation, the only physical objects offered commercially with *Plastic Beach* were the two versions of the CD. These glossy, standardized and miniaturized squares of cardboard and circles of plastic offer medial windows onto *Plastic Beach's* inviting world of tangibility, yet refuse to embody any of that tangibility themselves. The effect of this is less a case of 'look, but don't touch' as 'look and imagine what it might be like to touch'. This is, of course, indicative of the increasingly dematerialized course of modern music consumption culture. Here, decreasing physical engagement with popular music has led to a number of unexpected outcomes, most notably the renaissance of vinyl culture, for example[4]. Straw discusses the decline of the CD in terms of a 'slow loss of materiality', leading to a disintegration of integrity and corresponding loss of cultural resonance (2009: 79). Curiously, however, *Plastic Beach* chooses not to focus its critical eye on the looming pile-up of CD waste that should be the logical consequence of this rapid decline in the popularity of the CD. Instead, it prefers to iconify material music waste with the symbol of the Casiotone keyboard, the ubiquitous cheap electronic keyboard of the 1980s which is now simultaneously outmoded and in a process of rehabilitation as a cult artifact. Perhaps this choice is explained by Gorillaz' reliance on the CD as the main object of commerce for the *Plastic Beach* product when it was released.

3.2 How media channels were used.

Another set of identifiable phenomena can also be posited regarding how, during the marketing of *Plastic Beach*, media channels were manipulated in different ways to attract followers and build a sense of engagement with the project. These helped create the conditions for fan responses, although this by no means signifies that encouraging the nature of these responses was always intentional.

3.2.1 Courting fan media through style

Offering an even more overt foregrounding of materiality than the model of the island was a video created for the album track 'Some Kind of Nature'. Here, the home-made style, and use of ready made materials in stop-motion animation converges to an extent with the kinds of videos made by fans themselves on YouTube such as BrickFilms (fan-made LEGO videos that in turn inspired the look and feel of *The Lego Movie*, 2014). While the track was never intended as a single release, Hewlett nonetheless created an image, effectively a piece of sleeve art, to illustrate American rock artist Lou Reed's vocal contributions to the track. In the image, Reed is depicted eating cables like spaghetti, with the dinner bowl placed next to two side dishes, one of cable connectors and the other of Gorillaz action figures. The lyrics of the song are also tellingly ambivalent about the man-made materials that are their subject, suggesting both environmental pollution and alchemical possibility: 'Some kind of nature, some kind of soul; some kind of mixture, some kind of gold; some kind of majesty, some chemical load' (Gorillaz and L. Reed, 2010). As with many of the media objects of *Plastic Beach*, Reed's act of consumption combines elements of man-made materiality

with references to music making: the cable connectors represent the means of music production (XLRs and jacks), while the tiny Gorillaz action figures represent the creators of that music. In addition to this image, a 'tour visual' was commissioned for the song by 'professional mess makers' Beat13 (Beat13, 2010). The video was created using cheap materials, which emerge from the ground, entwined with Gorillaz CMYK action figures, discussed later in the article. What is interesting about this video is how the stop motion is deliberately fannish-looking in nature. The relatively simple stop motion technique and cheap materials used in the 'Some Kind of Nature' video (toys, cables, light ropes etc.) are well within the budgets and capabilities of the amateur animator, should they choose to commit their time to such a project. The hallmark of Gorillaz' usual music video style is a slick combination of 2D and 3D animation, often blended into real-life backgrounds. This is both expensive to produce and requires expertise well out of the reach of the amateur animator.

3.2.2 Mimicking reality using the media

In addition, another key media event staged around the launch of *Plastic Beach* may have encouraged users to feel that the fictional location was even more real. A 'Gorillaz takeover week' of the website of the British broadsheet newspaper The Guardian featured articles that aped content in the regular sections of the newspaper's coverage: travel, food, news, reviews etc. (The Guardian, 2010). The most novel aspect of the content was a series of prose articles, including a fake travel piece written by real travel writer Harry Ritchie, and another by author Howard Marks describing his experience of hanging out on the island. The pastiche of a serious newspaper travel section was enhanced further by a 'travel brochure' using stills from the 'Orchestral Trailer' video, while the Observer Food Monthly also contributed a small piece giving Gorillaz advice on their diet. Of particular importance here is Ritchie's travel piece, written in the style of Browne's comic prose and operating within the diegesis of the fictional world. It gave a detailed description of the island and map coordinates to locate it. Being allowed such free reign within a prestigious publication such as The Guardian is testament to the goodwill and cultural cachet accumulated by Gorillaz through their previous success. Additionally, The Guardian's enthusiasm for aligning themselves closely with a piece of pop experimentalism like the *Plastic Beach* campaign reveals much about the desire of the broadsheet to appear relevant and even cutting edge with its music coverage, particularly as the focus of this moves online.

3.2.3 Spreadability

Referring back to the criticisms of how Gorillaz failed to capitalize upon the spreadable potential of aspects of the campaign via social media (see Jenkins et. al, 2013), there was at least one significant late effort to achieve this. An official drawing competition to design a new character 'The Evangelist' for the narrative was launched via the main Gorillaz website. A digital canvas painting application was created especially for the competition by Hewlett's studio to allow fans to draw entries directly onto the website, which claims to have received over 5,000 drawings and registered 175,000 votes (gorillaz.com, 2010: 7). The simple design and limitations of the app as a drawing tool, meant that the resulting digital drawings were somewhat crude compared to much of Gorillaz fan art on DeviantArt. Some of the more experienced artists were able to exploit the capabilities of the software, such as the creative use of the inky wash seen in the winning entry. For the final stage of the competition, Hewlett created his own definitive version of the winning sketch, which remediated it into his own characteristic pen-and-ink technique. These images were of course shared independently by fans on social media. Nonetheless, in retrospect, hosting the competition away from the main website might have dramatically improved the 'spreadability' of the images, furthering the reach of the campaign. Essentially, then, the drawing competition was an attempt to try and tap into fan practices that were already widespread and circulating independently of 'official' channels like the website or Gorillaz YouTube channel. Incorporating fan creativity more closely into the official media stream may have had positive outcomes (spreadability, building a more thriving community) but also negative ones (diluting the official 'voice' or confusing further what was already a complex, diffuse narrative).

3.2.4 Licensing and merchandising

Despite the high toyetic potential of Gorillaz, mentioned in subsection 3.1.2, Albarn and Hewlett have consistently held back on fully exploiting the commercial possibilities of Gorillaz, not producing the range of merchandise common to most successful cartoon series. The Simpsons, for example, had grossed over $3 billion in merchandising revenue from over 1,000 items of merchandise by the 100th episode of the show (Schecter, 2006, cited in Podlas, 2007: 99). While Gorillaz were never destined to be popular on the scale of

The Simpsons, their reticence in this sphere is perhaps best explained by the fact that they were initially conceived largely as a means to effect satirical commentary on the disposable products and stars created by the entertainment industry - Simon Cowell's TV talent shows such as *Pop Idol* and *X-Factor* have been a[9] consistent stated target (Albarn, in NME, 2007). Commenting on *The Simpsons'* continual critique of consumerism, branding and advertising, Jonathan Gray notes the 'apparent hypocrisy' of allowing its own brand to 'at times appear to be on everything' (Gray, 2010: 15). Gorillaz have remained relatively immune to accusations of 'selling out', underlined by Albarn's decision for the *Escape to Plastic Beach* tour to fly its large cast collaborators around the world, resulting in a lack of profit for the tour overall. There have been subsequent attempts at branding synergy with Gorillaz, such as a 2012 partnership with Nike-owned Converse for the 2012 single 'Do Ya Thing'. This resulted in a collection of Gorillaz sneakers, with a prominent media campaign including billboard and magazine advertising. The main quid-pro-quo in this instance was that an expensive new mixed-media Gorillaz music video got made for the single. This resulted in notions of 'selling out' entering media discourses, with an article in The Independent stating:

The obvious response to this shilling is to scream "SELL-OUT!" But there's one annoying glitch in this particular sell-out. The songs are really good. So does it matter if they're funded by Nike? (Dean, 2012).

Perhaps anticipating this type of criticism, an announcement on their website contained a rather mealy-mouthed statement from virtual band member Russel about using commercial partners: '...that's what Gorillaz are all about, working and collaborating and exchanging ideas with other artists and global communicators'. In fact, what turned out to be late partnership deals for *Plastic Beach* were intended as a business strategy from the outset. The Music Week article states that the planned toys and brand involvement had already been 'devised in partnership with merchandise and online specialists All Access Today'.

3.2.5 Courting bloggers

Finally, while the examples presented so far provide evidence of the consequences of a lack of real tangibility in the marketing and sale of *Plastic Beach*, there remains one significant exception: a campaign by M&C Saatchi/Mark Sydney, devised to promote the album in the run-up to its Australian release, was successful in using the material and haptic qualities inherent in *Plastic Beach* to reach its market. Operating with a very limited budget of £3,000, the agency commissioned a series of 'flowers' from artist Jane Gillings to be made of pieces of 'jettisoned household plastic'[5]. These were then sent to music bloggers to encourage them to write about the release, with a reported 70% response rate from the small group of 20 key music bloggers who received the package (getmemedia, 2012). The sharing of content from these 20 resulted in 8,000 social media impressions. The campaign went on to win a number of advertising industry awards and has been linked to the high opening sales week in Australia, one of the few territories where the album reached number one. Included in the mail-out package was a message 'from the hand of Murdoc Niccals' (the band's fictional bass player), printed on an A4 sheet of music manuscript, with a memory stick attached that contained music files for the album. What, then, can be gleaned from the success of this campaign (which was not repeated in other parts of the world)? Commentary on the campaign suggests that the key to its popularity was the 'physicality' of 'old-fashioned mail media', with the plastic flower each blogger received valorized as a 'work of art; a want-to-keep thing'. The sense overall is that in an increasingly dematerialized, online world of both music release *and* music marketing, the campaign managed to break through by creating an event centred on materiality. Furthermore, far from being arbitrary, this moment perfectly articulated the themes of what it was trying to promote, and was successful in bridging the disconnect between what *Plastic Beach* promised in its online visuals, and what a limited set of users, in this case the lucky bloggers, could actually engage with physically and haptically.

3.3 How fans bridged the disconnect

A central argument of this article is that the most compelling way that Gorillaz fans manage to bridge this same divide is via a wealth of creative practices, focused on the materials from which the island and its inhabitants are constructed. These practices span a range of fannish behaviours that includes fan art, videos and other haptic and ludic activity. Many of these are created digitally, via digital art, game mods and videos with computer-generated animation. However, there is another realm of creativity where hand-crafted objects, echoing the Australian marketing campaign, provide a seemingly effective means of accessing *Plastic Beach's* inherent, yet just out of reach, materiality.

Firstly, the fact that Gorillaz plans to create a *Plastic Beach* related toy as part of the subscriber package

did not eventually happen does not, however, mean that the toyetic potential of the project went unfulfilled. Mikie Graham's design for a set of Gorillaz 'Plastic Beach Edition' figures takes the original Kidrobot pieces and customizes them, updating their clothing and adding detailed accessories to match the style presented for the new album. Additionally, each figure is provided with a solid base, further narrativizing the characters within an expanded 'setting'. Graham, who describes himself as a 'toy artist', operates in the area between fandom and professionalization perhaps best summarized here as prosumer. He sometimes sells his customisations online (www.zombiemonkie.com) and the 'Plastic Beach Edition' set were initially produced for a show in a California toy art gallery (Figure 2). The material production of replica crafting, with which toy customization intersects, is another widespread mimetic fan practice although, typically, examples in popular music culture are rarer. In an article on the crafting of *Blade Runner* (1982) props, Matt Hills ponders whether part of the practice's appeal lay in the fact that the film itself lacked substantial merchandising. This led to the fan crafting of DIY merchandise, which supplemented the relative lack of official products (Hills, 2011: 58). In a later article on replica crafting within the Doctor Who and Daft Punk fandoms (the latter a rare example of the study material fan practices within popular music culture), Hills warns against viewing this physicality in isolation, recognizing the fan-made replica as 'both immaterial and material', relying on an absent media text for its meaning.

Figure 2: Mikie Graham's customized figures, with updated Plastic Beach look

Source, Graham, (nd)

However, of equal concern here to what fans make is what they *do* with what they make. Further evidence of the desire to 'play' with Gorillaz is found across the internet, captured in both still and moving image media. Many instances of 'photoplay', a narrativisation of toy play through simply photographing the acts of play, occur for Gorillaz. These may be staged in interesting locations with stylish backdrops, or in combination with other toys, suggesting play forms that are more subtle, yet still undeniably playful and intertextual[6]. Heljakka, (2013: 436) views this as a play pattern in itself and it has even been suggested that visual displays like these are complemented by narrative possibilities linked to mnemonic function (Miller, 2008: 64). They can operate in even more social dimensions by giving tasks to the photographer, such as a request discovered on Flickr among My Little Pony photoplayers to 'photograph the pony so that it appears to be sweating' (interview with My Little Pony player born 1984, quoted in Heljakka, 2015: 104). Other instances for Gorillaz can be found involving videos of toy play, presented as mini-narratives. All of this has been theorized within the context of what toy scholars call the 'Internet playground' (Seiter, 2004). The importance here, however, is that when the toyetic potential of a product is not exploited to the extent that fans desire, they may simply find ways to overcome the deficit with their own practices. These might involve novel ways of using the limited products available, the crafting or customization of toys to create new ones, or the use of fans' own toys in the context of an often narrativized Gorillaz media-playspace.

Another set of fan practices arises from one crucial affordance of *Plastic Beach*: the ability to endlessly remediate the location, thanks to the attention to detail paid to the construction of the model, as well as the details evident in the digital images created for its interior. While this was of course key to the functionality of the games, fan remediations of the environment spanned drawings, stop motion animation

and a number of game mods (i.e. the practice of modifying hardware and software to perform functions not originally conceived by the designer). The game mods employ an impressive range of software engines, including *Minecraft, The Sims (1 and 2), Spore* and *Garry's Mod* and finally made their way on to YouTube after being subject to video capture and *machinima* techniques. In the practice of machinima, which in many ways overlaps with modding, real-time computer engines (particularly video games) are used to create cinematic videos, which are generally shared online. A subpractice here is the remediation of popular music videos (machinima music videos), many of which can be found for Gorillaz. However, the fact that Gorillaz' videos already have a tendency to resemble video game play is undoubtedly a strong factor here: three dimensional computer generated worlds form the backdrops for most of the videos and some, such as the jeep and giant rollercoaster from '19/2000' (2001) or the floating windmill island attacked by helicopters in 'El Manana' (2006) feature visual tropes borrowed directly from video games. An obvious aim with many of the fan mods is to achieve as much verisimilitude to the original island design as possible, within the limitations of the software. The crude, blocky, Lego-like graphics of Minecraft have a low definition that reflects the low cost of the software's development (Lastowka, 2011: 9), yet are both accessible to players, and act as a signal of Minecraft's authenticity (ibid.: 12).

Finally, professionalized and semi-professionalized animators have been attracted by the challenge of completing the storyboard video for 'Rhinestone Eyes', such as an attempt by animator Richard Van As. The aim of his work (still incomplete in June 2017) is to finish the video in an animation style that closely approximates Gorillaz' own, and can be found on his YouTube channel. However, at the other end of the spectrum of professionalization, a more foregrounded tactility can be found in a crude, yet effective, stop-motion animation video by YouTube user panicatthesocialgathering that remakes the storyboard using plasticine and cardboard. Evident in the video, rather than a slick finished product that necessarily appeals stongly to viewers, is a joy in crafting and play with materials.

10. Conclusion

The rarity of narrative transmedia in popular music provides few case studies, but those that exist are often extraordinarily rich in opportunities for multimodal analysis. The centrality of popular music culture to these worlds can challenge existing concepts within the study of world building, transmedia and its marketing. With budgets far exceeding other attempts at popular music transmedia to date, the complexity of Gorillaz' *Plastic Beach* provides the ideal locus for investigation for such a study. *Plastic Beach* was sold to its audience in ways that appealed to our desires to touch, hold, play and manipulate. However, the increasing immateriality of popular music culture, and the lack of physical consumables available for sale, confound these desires, opening a breach between what is promised and what is actually offered. Into this breach step fans, who compensate for the lack of available materiality and tactility by creating and inserting their own. Such responses can span the divide between the digital and the analogue via their presence online, allowing acts of play to be shared socially and observed. Furthermore, they may operate as useful indicators that could be used in the design of advertising and marketing for future instances of Popular Music Transmedia.

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Notes

1. Gerard Genette's concept of the paratext was theorized as a set of devices and conventions that mediate between book, author and reader in the influential 1987 book Seuils, later translated into English *as Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). This includes titles, book jackets and forewords although subsequently the concept has been applied by other authors to a range of media. See also Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately* (2010), where he refines the concept for a range of examples in film and television.

2. Works of the artists listed in this section can be found online.

Robert Bradford: www.robertbradford.co.uk; Tom Deiniger: www.tomdeiningerart.com; Zac Freeman: www.facebook.com/zacfreemanart; Katrina Slack; www.katrinaslack.co.uk; Erika Iris Simmons: www.facebook.com/erika.i.simmons; Angela Haseltine Pozzi; washedashore.org; Mandy Barker: mandy-barker.com.

3. A set of photographs of this process can be found on the Flickr site for Asylum SFX, the effects company that created the island at https://goo.gl/LAKbRU

4. See Bødker (2004), Straw (2002) and Straw (2009).

5. Images from the campaign can be seen at cargocollective.com

6. A wide selection of examples of this can be viewed at https://goo.gl/hTBKbE