The *Mobile Suit Gundam* Franchise: a Case Study of Transmedia Storytelling Practices and the Role of Digital Games in Japan

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ABSTRACT
The present study looks at the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise and the role of digital games from the conceptual frameworks of transmedia storytelling and the Japanese media mix. We offer a historical account of the development of "*the Mobile Suit Gundam*" series from a producer´s perspective and show how a combination of convergent and divergent strategies contributed to the success of the series, with a special focus on games. Our case can show some insight into underdeveloped aspects of the theory of transmedial storytelling and the Japanese media mix.

Keywords
Transmedia Storytelling, Media mix, Intellectual Property, Business Strategy

INTRODUCTION
The idea of transmediality is now more relevant than ever in the context of media production. Strong recognizable IPs take for example more and more space in the movie box office, and even the Producers Guild of America ratified a new title "transmedia producer" in 2010 [1]. This trend is by no means unique to the movie industry, as we also detect similar patterns in other media like television, documentaries, comics, games, publishing, music, journalism or sports, in diverse national and transnational contexts (Freeman & Gambarato, 2018).

However, transmedia strategies do not always manage to successfully engage their intended audiences; as the problematic reception of a number of works can demonstrate. For instance, the notable fan backlash received by the movie *The Last Jedi* movie (2017), belonging to the Star Wars franchise, or the final season of the Game of Throne franchise [2]. As Paul Booth observes, "the relationship between transmedia textual networks and participatory fandom is more complex than it may first appear" (2018: 279). It is not just about captive audiences buying anything that is thrown their way. Transmedial producers tune into what their fans desire in order to satisfy them while possibly attracting new ones.

In this paper, we attempt to offer a sustained account of how a transmedia producer adapts to their audience over a long period of time. We propose to look at the

conception and development of the Japanese *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise using the theoretical frameworks of transmedia storytelling and the media mix. From an industry perspective, the Gundam case has a media historical interest, and at the same time contributes to nuancing some underdeveloped aspects of these theories.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Around the last fifteen years, a whole field has emerged around the concept of transmediality. It would be impossible to review many contributions here, but we can refer to Freeman & Gambaratto´s recent compilation (2018) to map the field. If we focus on transmediality from a franchise/industry perspective, Henry Jenkins emerges as the most influential scholar. We will therefore take our starting point in his concept of transmedia storytelling, both as it is understood in the literature and in the industry. Later, we will contrast it to the concept of media mix as understood by Marc Steinberg.

Transmedia Storytelling

The origins of the transmedia industry perspective can be traced back to Marsha Kinder and her study of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja* franchise and the Nintendo Entertainment System (1991) . Her study established that intertextuality could emerge from products which are traditionally not considered as a medium (such as toys and merchandise), but which played a crucial role in intensifying the recognition and familiarity of a given IP. She coined the term *commercial transmedia supersystem* (Kinder 1991, p.38). As for the expression "transmedia storytelling," it was first coined by Henry Jenkins (2003, 2006 and 2007):

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels* for the purpose of creating *a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*. Ideally, each medium makes its own *unique contribution* to the unfolding of the story[3].

Jenkins stresses the importance of the development of a solid IP in designing the media franchise, distinguishing this method from a mere licensing or "old fashioned" franchise system, since the narrative structure needs to be coherent across all the media platforms. His argument here is about convergence: all media must support the same central idea, without loose ends or contradictions. His theoretical framework has been vigorously scrutinized and applied in multiple productive ways[4], and has also been picked up by industry practitioners in ways relevant to our study[5]. Robert Pratten[6] uses an analogy to describe transmedia storytelling: each platform is the piece of a puzzle, and all the pieces make the story together (Pratten 2011, p2).
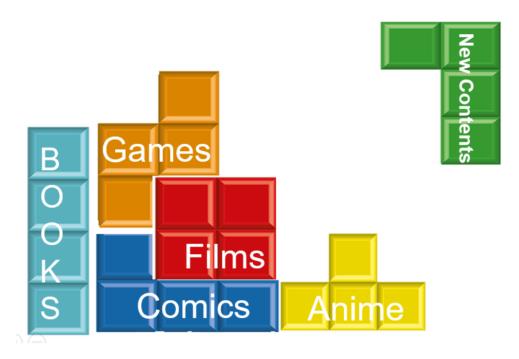
Figure 1: Conceptual model based on Pratten's analogy.

In transmedia storytelling, every new instantiation extends a fiction in either time or space. Great efforts are necessary to ensure that each instantiation doesn´t contradict another. Thus, the audience is expected to evaluate the works and fill the gaps within the big picture, even though some fan productivity forms can get them in trouble with the IP owners. Thus, producers design an intentional imaginary space at the same time as they create the overall transmedia storytelling experience. Digital games have played a crucial part in the conception, formulation and development of the transmedia storytelling theory. Kinder (1991) was inspired after scrutinizing the avid youth consuming their favorite characters across multiple media platform, among which video games were one of the essential contents, although they at that time had limited graphic and sound capabilities. Jenkins (2003) also indicated that the young who were used to consuming such a product as Pokémon would also become enthusiasts for consuming transmedia storytelling products. Klastrup and Tosca (2004) showed that digital games such as MMORPGs allow players to inhabit their favorite worlds if the mythos, tops, and ethos of the transmedial worlds are respected. Despite this, how digital games effectively 'fit' into the overall development of the transmedial universe is yet to be explored.

Japanese Media Mix

In Japan, transmedia storytelling corresponds to "the media mix", a practice emerged in an industrial context from the 60s on; and theorized from a media perspective from the 80s on (Steinberg, 2012a). Marc Steinberg defines the media mix as "the cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises" (Steinberg: 2012a: viii), and distinguishes between the commercial approach, (the marketing media mix where various channels are used to advertise a major product) and the artistic one (the anime media mix, where the producers create different related products that can be consumed for pleasure in their own right).

Steinberg argues that there is a fundamental difference between the Jenkins-inspired transmedia storytelling approach and the media mix practices he has observed.

"Japanese media industries have tended since the late 1980s, to embrace a model of media divergence, while Hollywood has tended to stay closer to a model of media convergence" (2012b: 73). While transmedia storytelling works within the premises of consistent world building and additive complexity, a lot of media mix products prefer a divergent model where variations of the central world are accepted. This is not only true of fan creations, but also of officially produced instantiations. In this way, Japanese media mix producers embrace and economically exploit official parodies, 4-frame comics or short episodes that in a western perspective would seem to undermine the integrity of the transmedia story. Digital games developed in Japan are no exception as they have been a part of this "media mix" ecosystem since the early days of the video game industry itself (Picard 2013; Navarro& Loriguillo 2015). By so doing, IP related products can surround fans with a variety of products allowing them to consume as many related products as they please while creating more touchpoints to newcomers to a ground of products (Nakamura 2017) as in figure 2.
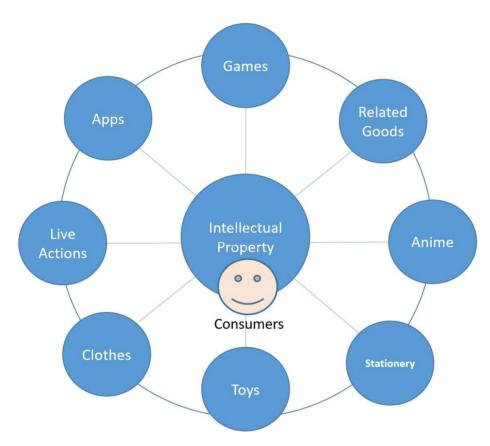

Figure 2: Conceptual model on the Media Mix

While some academic journal has scrutinized these phenomena (i.e. Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon eds, 2015), further efforts are necessary to highlight the functions of digital games in developing the media mix in the Japanese market.

Analysis method

We will trace the opposite dynamics of convergence (transmedia storytelling) and divergence (media mix multiplicity) in the *Mobile Suit Gundam* series. Nakamura (2018) previously analyzed the Gundam franchise among others in his comparative case studies to examine how the franchise fits the definition of transmedia storytelling, verifying that the franchise pursues both dynamics, as Steinberg suggests many Japanese media mix products do. Our analysis, for the present study, then, attempts

to scrutinize the role that digital games played in the formation and development of the Gundam franchise. By thoroughly scrutinizing the development process of a media franchise, we hope to reveal some clues to the roles of digital games in development and expansion of media franchise and verify how exactly multiplicity is made possible while still maintaining a recognizable brand.

OUR CASE: *THE MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM* FRANCISE [7]

The Gundam franchise begins with *Mobile Suit Gundam* (henceforth *First Gundam*), a science fiction anime series for television centered around epic space battles and the use of robot mobile armor suits. The series first aired from April 7, 1979 until January 26, 1980. Its popularity grew and theatrical features and an edited version with entirely new cuts were shown in movie theaters in Japan. The series was split into a trilogy and released on chronological order. This was followed by a sequel, spin-offs across TV, film, Original Video Animation (OVA), a VR attraction[8], and various kinds of merchandise, amongst which the most popular were plastic scale models of the robot mobile suits. The First Gundam is set in a fictional future earth with space colonies. The main plot depicts the conflict between the Earth Federation and the Principality of Zeon: a group of space colonies that have declared their independence. The year is the (fictional) Universal Century 0079. The Mobile Suits are the armed pilot-operated robots used in this conflict, and Gundam is the name of the robot armor suit operated mainly by protagonist Ray Amuro. In subsequent series, Gundam or related models become the robot of choice by the protagonists. It is one of the finest and best-known examples of the *mecha* genre (Booker, 2010: 186).

The Conception of the series

Japan Sunrise (henceforth, Sunrise), the animation studio that created the series had been developing anime for television since their establishment; mostly sponsored by toy manufacturer Clover. The goal of the sponsor was to sell toys; thus, Sunrise aimed for creating series that would boost sales of merchandise. Its target group was primary school boys, since children tended to stop watching anime programs altogether after primary school. However, the commercial success of *Battleship Yamato by* Office Academy[9] made Sunrise realize that anime could attract teens and even older audiences, if it included dramatic elements and an epic scale setting. This inspired Sunrise to strategically develop the new series so that it would both satisfy their fan base and attract older audiences. First, they brought in veteran animation director, Yoshiyuki Tomino, and Hiroyuki Hoshino as a chief writer. Also, they hired Kenichi Matsuzaki from Studio Nue, specialized in providing mechanical designs as well as technical and scientific consulting in Science Fiction projects[10]. After thorough deliberation, the team decided to base the story roughly on the plot of Jules Verne´s *Two Years' Vacation*, set in a future era of conflict amongst the residents of space colonies and the earth. The story was to unfold over the course of one year, with a group of boys and girls accidentally coming on board of a battleship. In a midterm presentation of the project, the toy company sponsor pointed out that without giant robots, toy sales might suffer. Then Haruka Takachiho[11] introduced the team to the novel *Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein, which depicted power suits for its Mobile Infantry. This eventually led to Mobile Suit concepts which, unlike a precedent giant super robot, became more alike military weaponry. Their height was also set to 18 meters instead of 40-50. The color of the main robot was initially going to be white silver, also inspired by the novel[12]. However, the sponsor toy manufacturer intervened to add primary colors such as blue, red and yellow to the design instead[13]. An additional mechanical combination feature was also added even though it was unnecessary from a plot perspective, but useful for the toys[14]. The design of mobile Suits for Zeon´s side maintained a more militaristic design due to less restrictions on the part of the sponsor. The series director Yoshiyuki Tomino also instructed Okawara that the enemy robot need to have a mono-eye[15]. Thus, while

some of the concepts were altered by the sponsor in order to attract the younger boys target group, the central theme, aimed at the older audience, was kept intact and finally the series aired from April 1979. Shortly after, however, it became clear for Clover, the toy company that the predictions for the toy market had failed, since the TV program never became popular among the targeted audience. This caused the TV anime to be canceled prematurely on January 1980.

Transmedia development: striving for convergence

At this point, the IP was picked up by toy company Bandai. Even though they released their first plastic scale models six months after the last episode was broadcast, the merchandize became a social phenomenon[16]. At that time, anime-themed toys were called "Mass Communication Theme Toys" and were considered short-lived as sales tended to drop dramatically after the end of broadcasting[17]. Bandai usually does not deal with anime projects that they initially did not sponsor. However, they had received requests from junior high and high school students as well as some older hobbyists, to manufacture Gundam as a plastic model. In response to these, Bandai convinced Sunrise to license the products for development of plastic scale models. In this process, Bandai decided to adopt the international scale which was often used for military vehicle plastic models. On July 1980, the main robot, *Mobile Suit Gundam* was first released. Zeon's side of plastic models followed. By releasing them as a scale of 1/144, the fans not only could reproduce the scenes from the anime, but also create imaginary battle scenes set in the Universal Century. With popularity of plastic models, the first trilogy of compilation films was released in March 1981, and ending trilogy in March 1982, taking advantage of the hype of the plastic models.

Expanding the world by tuning in to the fans

The sequel, *Mobile Suit Gundam Z*, however, did not begin broadcasting until March 2, 1985. That is, there were three years between the *First Gundam* and its sequel. Meanwhile, in the lack of new anime, fan-industry cooperative endeavors contributed to the expansion of the fictional world of Gundam (hereafter called Universal Century World to distinguish from the first period).

Aware of the fan interest, Hobby Japan, a monthly magazine dedicated to all things about plastic models, published a special issue *How to Build Gundam* in July 1981. It depicted how to modify plastic models to create battle scenes; even a battle which had never appeared in the anime. This was followed by an Anime dedicated magazine, *Monthly Out*'s, special edition *Gundam Century* in September 1981. In this edition, the technological and political backstory of key features such as space colonies, weapons, and robots were explained[18]. Then, one of Japan's major publishers, Kodansha issued a book *SF Plastic Model Book Mobile Suite Gundam: Real Type Catalogue*, where they introduced the special robots that had never appeared in the TV series but were mentioned in *Gundam Century*[19]. Bandai followed this movement by launching new plastic models series, Mobile Suit Variation (henceforth, MSV) from April 1983. The series had robots and vehicles that hadn't appeared in the anime but shed light on various aspects of the Universal Century World. These efforts by various companies enabled fans to fill the gap of the imaginary space where the main story of the anime did not take place. Thus, they could immerse themselves in the transmedial universe through performative play, without any new main story development. Two sequel TV series (1985 and 1986) and a theatrical feature, *Mobile Suit Gundam: Char's Counterattack* (1989) were then released. Some of the robots from MSV appeared in these works, becoming thus part of the official 'canon.[20]'

In addition, while trying to expand the world of the Universal Century, attempts were also made to gain a new fan base with new instantiations of the Gundam series. Setting the Universal Century at 123 and 153 years respectively, *Mobile Suit Gundam F91* (henceforth, *F91*) released in 1991 and *Mobile Suit V Gundam* (henceforth *V*

Gundam) broadcasted from April 1993 changed designs and the backstory of the conflict between the Earth Federation and Zeon. The only original elements left were the basic mechanical design of Gundam and the fact that the conflict involved space colonies. However, the audience didn´t take well after this new approach.

After this failure, Sunrise temporarily decided not to advance the timeline of the Universal Century. Instead, they focused on the time period between One Year War period in the First Gundam to around the time when *Mobile Suit Gundam: Char's Counterattack* took place. *Mobile Suit Gundam 08 MS platoon*, an OVA that depicted the battle sequences like local warfare during the One Year War, was launched in 1996. In 2001, the animation director of *First Gundam* and character designer of several Gundam, Yoshikazu Yasuhiko drew the comics *Mobile Suit Gundam-the-origin*. Harutoshi Fukui, a well-known author in the Science Fiction genre in Japan wrote a novel about the era immediately following the *Char's Counterattack* incident, titled *Mobile Suit Gundam UC [Unicorn]*. Both comics and novels later became OVAs and were also broadcasted on television. In April 2018, Sunrise finally decided to slowly advance the timeline to next 100 years of the Universal Century, calling it UC Next 0100 project. The first work coming out from this project released in November 2018 was *Mobile Suit Gundam NT[Narrative],* the immediate sequel to *UC [Unicorn]*. This is to be followed in winter 2019 with *Mobile Suit Gundam Hathaway's Flash* -the first film of the trilogy that depicts the conflict taking place after UC 0100.[21]

Embracing divergence and multiplicity

While the Universal Century World was growing through the introduction of new instantiations across multiple media platforms and the commercialization strategy of scale plastic models and their associated texts, other, more serendipitous events, contributed to expanding the *Gundam* fan base in ways that the producers were quick to incorporate. The first example is Bandai´s magazine dedicated to the plastic model´s, *Model Information,* issued monthly at Bandai's Shizuoka Plant. In 1984, this otherwise conventional publication picked up on a fan art contribution and started including a series of four-frame humorous comics, *Mobile Suits etc.* which became a hit among fans due to its super deformed designs of Gundam and other related robots[22]. This style depicts the robots with smaller bodies and bigger heads, in cute, humorous proportions. They turned out to be popular, even though *Model Information* was merely a company's owned media with limited circulation. *Super Deformed Gundam* or the *SD Gundam* series were born.

Another case from August 1985 refers to the success of toy capsule vending machines offering *SD Gundam* objects, which gained substantial popularity among elementary school students[23]. This eventually led to a series of videogames released from 1987 on and even a short anime film *Mobile Suit SD Gundam,* released in 1988 along with *Mobile Suit Gundam Char's Counterattacks*. The videogames will be discussed in detail in the following section. However, it is important to note that the *SD Gundam* videogame helped Bandai realize that in order to make their IP attractive to new market segments, it was necessary to take it into a completely different direction while maintaining the core design. In other words, the company became savvy about stripping the Gundam world down to its most iconic elements, that could both be recognized and remade in attractive ways, but not so much that it would alienate the fans. This same approach would be later adapted to the development of new televised anime series, such as *Mobile Fighter G Gundam* and its subsequent installments, which only used Gundam and its designs[24]. Everything else, such as character development and world setting was mostly different from the other titles (except for *Mobile Suit Gundam Seed* and *Gundam Seed Destiny)*. With this flexible strategy, some works like *New Mobile Report Gundam W* or *Mobile Suit Gundam 00* managed

to gain new audience such as female audience.

Finally, the company established a full-on Gundam dedicated monthly magazine, *Gundam A,* in June 2001. This platform allowed all Gundam fans, both old time Universal Century fans and newcomers, to enjoy all types of Gundam in a thriving community.

The Role of videogames in the Gundam franchise

	Title	Platform	Sales Date	Sales Volume
1	Mobile Suite Gundam Federation VS. Zeon DX	PS2	2001/12/6	950,000
2	**SD Gundam Sengokuden: Kunitori Monogatari**	**GB**	**1990/3/24**	**920,000**
3	**SD Gundam G GENERATION**	PS	1998/8/6	730,000
4	**SD Gundam World Gachapoin Senshi 2 Capsule Senki**	**FC**	**1989/6/25**	**660,000**
5	Mobile Suit Gundam: Encounters in Space	PS2	2003/9/4	640,000
6	Mobile Suite Z Gundam A.E.U.G VS. Titans	PS2	2003/12/4	630,000
7	**SD Gundam G Generation Neo**	**PS2**	**2002/11/28**	**590,000**
8	**SD Gundam Gaiden Knight Gundam Story**	**FC**	**1990/8/11**	**580,000**
9	Mobile Suite Z Gundam Hot Scramble	FC	1986/8/28	570,000
10	**SD Gundam G Generation 0**	**PS**	**1999/8/12**	**570,000**

Table 1: Top 10 sales ranking of the Gundam video games in Japan [25]

Videogames played a crucial role in extending the Gundam Universe. Typically, transmedia games in the west are secondary products that faithfully adapt the events of what is considered the main product in the connected media ecology, most often a film. These games are "characterized by an adaptation aesthetic, a process through which the images and characters from the film become playable and/or navigable." (Kennedy, 2018: 72). This was also the case with the initial Gundam videogames, but they later broke from this mold in interesting ways.

The first Gundam videogame was published in 1983 for home computers. Due to the limitation of computer CPU at the time, games were either in the adventure genre, basically following the main story of the anime version or a variation of *Galaxian* type shooting games, with a slight resemblance to Gundam characters and vehicles[26]. These games, although extending a product line, didn´t really bring anything new to the Universal Century World. They were targeted toward the existing fans and allowed them to revisit their beloved universe through engagement in immersive, repetitive play.

On November 20th, 1987, the first videogame version of *SD Gundam*, *SD Gundam Gachapon Warriors, Scramble Wars* was released and signified a drastic change in the producer´s strategy. Specific content was created, but more importantly, the super deformed style discussed above was adopted and spread to *SD Gundam Gaiden* series and the *Super Robot Wars* videogames series. In total, 65 *SD Gundam* titles have been released so far and the series continues by 2018[27], among which 32 titles or roughly half of titles being produced by 1996 for either the 8 bit and 16 bit platforms, implying the series paved the way to continuously engage the attention of primary

school children. The realistic depiction of the robot or mobile suits at the time was nearly impossible. Thus, super deformed design was more convenient for developing games. Super Deformed design was also a chance to distinguish the new products from the older ones, thus expanding the horizons of Gundam as a design. Iconic incarnations such as the Samurai Warrior Gundam or Knight Gundam were designed[28]. In many cases, the SD videogames are based on a completely original story. In other words, the digital game version of the SD Gundam series has played a crucial role in expanding the Gundam franchise as well as the fan base, not by extending the Universal Century World as a standard approach to transmedial storytelling would have it, but by creating a parallel related world that spins act of consumption on its own right, and also stirs interest in the older instantiations of the franchise. This seems be effective, as shown in Table 1. Among the top ten most selling Gundam games, six of them are SD Gundam series among which the three were sold during 8 bit and 16-bit eras, further strengthening the argument that the SD Gundam video game series played a crucial role in the Gundam franchise.

Later, other videogame titles more in tune with the definition of transmedia storytelling emerged. The first of such was launched on July 6th, 1991 with *Mobile Suit Gundam F91 Formula Wars 0122*[29]. This game was launched after the release of anime film *Mobile Suit Gundam F91* and tells the story one year prior to what happens in the film. In this case, the geographical space and timeline of the Universal Century World was extended. Following this title, substantial volume of the titles dedicated to expanding the Universal Century World were released as both CPU and graphical processing power of videogame platforms has increased as Table 2 shows.

		Title	Platform	Date	Sales
1		Mobile Suit Gundam Lost War Chronicle	PS2	2002/8/1	382,670
2		Mobile Suit Gundam Battle Field Record U.C. 0081	PS3	2009/9/3	259,245
3		Mobile Suit Gundam Climax UC	PS2	2006/3/2	241,597
4		Mobile Suit Gundam: Zeonic Front	PS2	2001/9/6	239,055
5		Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 1	SS	1996/9/20	206,937
6		Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 2	SS	1996/12/6	187,569
7		Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	PS3	2006/11/11	146,199
8		Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 3	SS	1997/3/7	134,878
9		Gundam Side Story 0079: Rise from the Ashes	DC	1999/8/26	118,813
10		Mobile Suit Gundam Side Stories	PS3	2014/5/29	109,898
11		Mobile Suit Gundam: MS Sensen 0079	Wii	2007/7/26	89,435
		Mobile Suit Gundam: F91 Formula Wars 0122	SFC	1991/7/6	NA

Table 2: Sales ranking of the Gundam video games Using Transmedia Storytelling Approaches.[30]
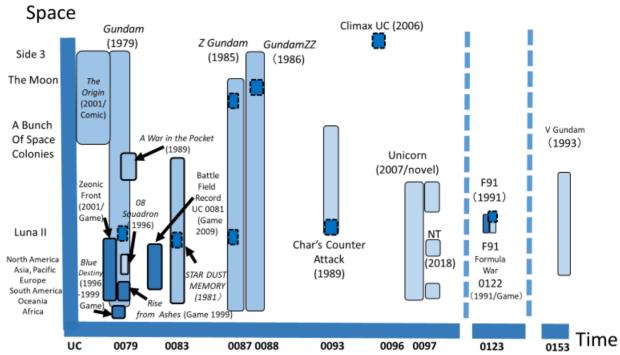
Figure 3: The expansion of the Universal Century World. (Dark ones represent works by the video games. Presence of digital games make the timeline denser during One Year War period. (This figure is symbolic and does not represent the actual time and space allotment) Original Figure in (Nakmaura 2018, p18) is modified

While these titles contributed greatly to the future Gundam franchise as many of newly introduced characters, technologies as well as political incidents have been inherited in both regular Gundam series and the SD Gundam series, the fact that the most popular of them sold just under 400,000, implies that they only attracted existing fans. Eventually, titles which take advantage of the vast fictional world as a playing field, such as *Mobile Suit Gundam Federation VS. Zeon* (henceforth *Versus* series) began to be released during the PS2 era and later generations. The *Versus* series was initially launched as arcade games followed by porting to the consoles; in order to satisfy both Gundam fans as well as regular game players. The involvement of Capcom (a leading company known for producing top-notch arcade fighting games) ensured the quality of game mechanics both for single and multiple players modes. This allowed long-time fans to immerse into the Gundam world and simultaneously enabled newcomers to have a great gaming experience without knowing much about the series. With a diverse lineup, the videogames of the Gundam series contributed to transmedia storytelling strategies as well as media mix or divergent strategies that effectively extended the product life cycle of the entire Gundam franchise.

Lesson learned from the Gundam case

The historical scrutiny of the Gundam series both from a convergence (transmedia storytelling) and divergence (media mix) perspectives has shown that the franchise has alternated between those two poles in a harmonic manner. For a little over 10 years, specifically from 1978 until 1991, the *Mobile Suit Gundam* series successfully extended the Universal Century World both in relation to the timeline and spatial perspective across multiple media platforms, including the televised anime series, the theatrical anime film, and the OVAs. These works covered both simple stories and complex situations, from political, personal, and/or dramatic perspectives. Several attempts were made to attract new and younger audiences; but were unsuccessful

until Bandai developed *Mobile Suit SD Gundam* series, a divergent strategy that only maintained the design of Gundam but changed everything else. Other serendipitous occurrences, like the success of the 4-frame comics in the *Model Information* magazine and the toy vending machines were embraced by the company and incorporated into their main strategy. This alternative approach was further enhanced by the appearance of video games. The fact that the video game versions of the SD Gundam series are still popular today demonstrates that in some cases, a divergent approach is an advantage for the media franchise.
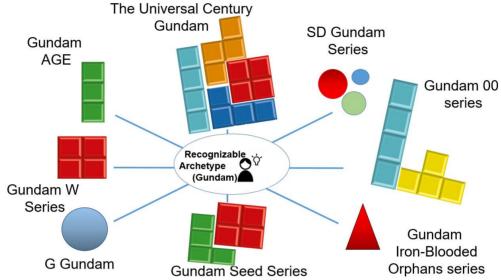

Figure 4: In the Gundam franchise, convergent approaches and divergent approaches to the franchise complement one another

Another important point is that increased producer flexibility, a collective approach that allowed for the participations of other actors and the incorporation of fan material turned out to have positive results. Even in the phases where Sunrise was trying to establish a coherent convergent world, they allowed third parties like Bandai to contribute to the development of canon material. Such a loose collaboration allowed the storytellers of the Gundam series to further expand the boundary on which the story unfolds, contributing further to the longevity of the franchise. This strategy is substantially different from the more tightly controlled approach of transmedia storytelling franchises like the Star Wars Universe. In the case of convergent approaches based on coherent additive complexity, questions of canon fidelity become indeed crucial both for producers and fans alike, leaving less room for alternatives.

TRANSMEDIAL INDUSTRIAL STRATEGIES REVISITED

Our analysis has revealed some interesting details that can help nuance our understanding of transmedia strategies in relation to industrial franchises, specifically in two areas: the alternation of processes of convergence vs divergence, and the process of abstraction that can turn transmedia content into near archetypes to be deployed in many different ways.

As for the first issue, and roughly put, we could say that the transmedia storytelling model is about one world plus one coherent plot, while the media mix welcomes multiple parallel worlds and interconnected (but different) plots, as Steinberg also notes (2012b). The *Gundam* franchise thrives in both systems. However, convergence and divergence might in fact not be opposite poles to be isolated as belonging to

either Hollywood productions or Japanese media mix, but rather complementary strategies. To be fair, Steinberg does acknowledge that media mix products also use convergent strategies, but we propose to separate the two kinds of strategies from their territorial origins. Instead, we can think of them as design possibilities that depend on each other in a sort of pendular movement that has a lot to do with timing and reception. In the early stages of establishing a franchise, convergent strategies will be advantageous in order to create a fan base that can develop an attachment to a recognizable mythos, topos and ethos (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). But as soon as this has succeeded, producers can incorporate divergent elements for different kinds of experiences (like the Bandai models) and to awaken new emotions (the super deformed cute robots). This is of course all culturally contingent, as not all fan bases are equally amenable to divergence.

Our second finding has to do with the abstraction operation best exemplified by the videogames of the SD Gundam series, where the essence of the transmedial world of Gundam is distilled to its most basic component of the robot armor. The establishment of this strong and recognizable archetype allows the producers to do away with the original storylines and even world elements, opening for development possibilities of the franchise across different media, and targeted towards new fan bases. Some transmedia characters, like Sherlock Holmes, allow for many variations and can still be recognizable by a few traits. But the Gundam franchise takes this to an entirely different level. The robots become near archetypes, at an even more abstract level than named characters. We will go so far as to argue that the Gundam archetype is essentially situated just under the level of genre (for example, the mecha genre), something that can be incarnated in many possible ways as long as it still maintains the minimal identity marker of the robot armor suit. This is on one side an extreme stripping down of meaning and an opening to potentially infinite ways of filling up the now nearly empty shell. New characters, plots, worlds and even tone (serious, humorous, infantile, mature) become suddenly possible.

This can best be seen in the digital game line up of the Gundam franchise. While video game platforms had limited graphics and sound capabilities, the game titles which can maximize the use of limited capabilities were introduced by taking the divergent approaches (the *SD Gundam* series*)*. With the technological advancement of the consoles, games which more faithfully followed the transmedia storytelling approaches were made. After realizing that such titles could only attract core fans, a hybrid mix of adaptation and world expansion approaches (the *Versus* series) were adopted to attract both core fans and newcomers, taking advantage of the characteristics inherent to actions games (that depict playing characters, opponents and the environment of playfield, often more beautifully rendered in later generations). In other words, the strategies of releasing digital games for the franchise have been as diverse as the entire franchise itself, further showing the importance of implementing both convergent and divergence strategies with flexibilities. These endeavors on producers' side created the interesting nuances that allow multiplicity is made possible while still maintaining a strong recognizable brand. We cannot think of a better case to show how radical semantic movements can still inspire fan attachment to all the franchise. In fact, some of the strategies that now are widespread in the Japanese media industry have their origin on this franchise.

ENDNOTES

[1] Finke N. 2010 "Producers Guild of America Agrees on New Credit: 'Transmedia Producer'" *DEADLINE HOLLYWOOD* <https://deadline.com/2010/04/producers-guild-of-america-vote-on-creation-of-new-credit-transmedia-producer-30751/ > (Sep 10 2018 Access)

[2] Some outraged fans even attempted to produce their own version of the movie. The group currently collected little over 416.5 million US dollars. Remake the Last Jedi 2018 <https://www.remakethelastjedi.com/> For Game of Throne, over 1.3 million fans sign the petition to remake the final season.< https://www.change.org/p/hbo-remake-game-of-thrones-season-8-with-competent-writers?source_location=discover_feed> (May 21 2019 Access)

[3] Jenkins, H 2007 "Transmedia Storytelling 101" *Henry Jenkins Official Blog* <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html> (Sep 10 2018 Access)

[4] For instance, Scolari conducted a close study on the works of the transmedia storytelling namely *24* series (2009) and *Lost* (2013) from a narrative semiotics perspective. In relation to non-fiction genres, Lachman (2010) examined the possibility of using this method to analyze journalistic practices; and Moloney expounded how the transmedia storytelling method was implemented in the documentary genre (2011). It has also been applied to the field of digital preservation of cultural inheritance (Dusi, Ferretti and Furini, 2017) and even to media literacy (Jenkins, et al 2009; Lachman 2011) or education (Warren, et al 2012). Notable examples of the use of the transmedial storytelling framework in relation to specific case studies are Freeman, who examined various works from the 20th Century (2017) and Guynes and Haasler-Forest (2018), who scrutinized the Star Wars franchises. All these texts testify to the applicability and influential nature of Jenkins framework.
[5] For instance, industry veteran Jeff Gomez agrees with this definition and argues that in this digital era, when people can exchange ideas at ease using multiple media devices, transmedia storytelling needs to facilitate participation to respond to the audience´s desire. *Transmedia storytelling-interview with Jeff Gomez* Unitec Institute of Technology Channel on Youtube < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf-MDZm2wsU >

[6] A London based film director and transmedia consultant, http://www.tstoryteller.com/blog.

[7] Unless otherwise noted, the subsequent sections are based on Nikkei Entertainment! 2008.(Nikkei Entertainment ! ed 2008), and Sunrise 2008: the information initially complied in Japanese by Nakamura (2018) is realigned and expanded (the digital game portions) for the present analysis purpose

[8] *Gundam VR:Daiba Kyoshu*(Gundam VR/ Attack on Daiba) at *VRSHINJUKU* https://vrzone-pic.com/shinjuku/activity/gundam.html

[9] In elsewhere, it is called *Star Blazer*

[10] Mostly known for their service for *Battleship Yamato* and Invincible *Steel Man Daitarn 3*. Interview conducted to Planner Masao Izuka in Web Gendai 2002(p.253)

[11] The founder of Studio Nue.

[12] ibid (Web Gendai 2002.pp 256-257)

[13] Based on the information provided in Sunrise, Asahi Shinbunsha Megaromania ed.(2014, p 69)

[14] Interview conducted to Kunio Okawara in Web Gendai (p.200)

[15] A sort of illuminated camera inside of the robot´s head, ibid (p 202)

[16] Based on book written by Kenji Inomata in (p.22)

[17] Interview conducted to Shin Unozawa a former President of BandaiNamco Games in Nakamura (2010, p. 53)

[18] This special edition was headed by Kenichi Matsuzaki from Studio Nue, the person who worked on the anime itself.

[19] Designed by Kunio Okawara, the mechanical designer of the anime series himself. Okawara K 1981. Kunio Okawara Original Illustration In Kodansha 1981 "Zaku MS-06R Taipu" *SF Puramo Bukku Kidosenshi Gandam Real Type Catalogue* Kodansha

[20] Detail regarding MSV series can be found in Asano 2018

[21] Official Home Page of Mobile Suit Gundam Series, *Gundam Info* (In Japanese)< https://www.gundam.info/news/hot-topics/news_hot-topics_20181130_29.html>

[22] Interview conducted to Shin Unozawa in Nakamura (2010. p.53)

[23] Based on book written by Kenji Inomata (1995. p50)

[24] Based on book written by Kenji Inomata in (1995. p134)

[25] Numbers based on Nikkei Entertainment (2007, 107) All of numbers are estimated. Other information is based on Media Arts Database < https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/gm/?locale=en&display_view=pc> F-ism Game database byGz Brain < https://www.f-ism.net/> confirms that game titles released after 2007 did not sell more than 570000 units, leaving the ranking unchanged.

[26] Agency of Cultural Affairs, Media Arts Database < https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/gm/index.php> (2019 Feb 11 Access) Let's Play video can be found in various sites.

[27] Based on Media Arts Database, originally listed 96 titles, deducting the best titles, special editions, and multiple platforms launch titles counted as single title.

[28] Interview conducted to Shin Unozawa in Nakamura(2010 p.55)

[29] 0122 signifies the Universal Century 122 year. This implies that the game takes place before the film, *Mobile Suit Gundam F91*, which takes place in UC 123

[30] Number are based on Gz Brain Database <https://www.f-ism.net/> All of numbers are estimated

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