Exploring Media Mix in Transmedia Storytelling: A Case Study on 'Cyberpunk 2077' and 'Cyberpunk: Edgerunners'

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Abstract: The research investigates the combined role of video games and Japanese anime in transmedia storytelling. Taking "Cyberpunk 2077" and its anime adaptation "Cyberpunk: Edgerunners" as focal points, the study delves into the unique narrative experience this media pairing bestows upon the storytelling universe and its audience. Rather than adhering to traditional linear narratives, this amalgamation furnishes an unstructured, symbol-laden storytelling odyssey. The paper introduces and scrutinizes the notion of "media convergence". It is noted that through the integration of Japanese manga and video game elements, "Cyberpunk 2077" witnessed a resurgence in sales and acclaim. Concurrently, "Cyberpunk: Edgerunners" influenced the game with its pronounced symbolic essence, hinting at an emergent lean towards postmodernism in modern media production.

Keywords: transmedia storytelling, media mix, Cyberpunk 2077, video game, post-modernism

1. Introduction

In the current context of multimodal communication, traditional single-medium narratives no longer meet the cultural consumption demands of the audience. Instead, there is a need for a new narrative mode that utilizes multimedia platforms for collaborative storytelling, allowing the audience to participate and coconstruct an expansive story world. Transmedia storytelling, as a postmodern narrative form, embodies such a mode. With its characteristics of intertextuality and fragmentation, it endows stories with greater depth and richness. To interpret the term "media" in transmedia storytelling, we can examine it from two dimensions: differentiation and integration. Differentiation entails analyzing and summarizing the distinct attributes of various media, while integration concerns how these media come together. In this article, we introduce the concept of "media mix," which will enhance the theory of transmedia storytelling in the context of multimodal communication and provide practical suggestions for game development and media production.

For this study, "Cyberpunk 2077" and "Cyberpunk: Edgerunners" was chosen as case studies. The aim is to explore the application and impact of the "media" concept within transmedia storytelling. This not only enriches the narrative experience for audiences of different media but also changes the negative image of "Cyberpunk 2077." Although "Cyberpunk 2077" faced criticisms for various issues

and was perceived by some media as a blunder in the history of video games, the release of the "Cyberpunk: Edgerunners" anime has led to more positive feedback for the game. This shift is evident not only in commercial metrics but also in the reactions of players and viewers.

This research examines transmedia storytelling from two perspectives: differentiation and integration. Differentiation focuses on the distinct attributes of each medium, termed "intermediality," while integration delves into how these media collaborate, known as "media mix." This study emphasizes integration, analyzing how the anime medium has enhanced the theory of transmedia storytelling, offering valuable insights for game developers and media producers.

Crucially, a novel interaction emerges between anime viewers and game players. Even without playing the game, audiences can gain a holistic narrative experience through the anime, exemplifying the hallmark of transmedia storytelling. This trend is evident not only in its commercial success but also reveals that in today's fragmented era, audiences have more freedom in selecting their preferred medium and narrative experience. The narrative core of transmedia storytelling is not a top-down designed worldview but a bottom-up approach to designing the audience's cognitive model. This phenomenon suggests a postmodern trend in the current media industry.

2. Mapping the Terrain: Transmedia Practices and Media Mix

Transmedia storytelling was first defined by Jenkins in his 2006 book "Convergence Culture." [1] Over the past decade, this field has seen remarkable advancements both in theoretical studies and empirical applications, with profound influence. Take "The Matrix" as an example. The film expanded its narrative across multiple platforms, serving as an empirical case of transmedia storytelling. The "Matrix" series consists of movies, comics, animations, and video games, collectively building a narrative universe. Jenkins used the term "transmedia storytelling" to explain how "The Matrix" is presented across various media. He believes that the trilogy, together with the game series, represents an entertainment manifestation of the media mixers. They create a narrative world that isn't restricted to just films or games by integrating multiple texts. Ideally, each medium makes a unique contribution to the unfolding of this fictional tale. Please remember that all the papers must be in English and without orthographic errors.

Thus, Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as a process where elements of a novel are systematically dispersed across multiple delivery channels, creating a coordinated and unified entertainment experience [2]. Ideally, each medium contributes uniquely to the narrative. However, transmedia storytelling is not just about technicalities; it's equally significant at the cultural transformation level. Evidently, it possesses hypertextual characteristics. Against the backdrop of the media mix, relatively free hypertextual navigation allows the audience to shift from a dramatic narrative, targeting the story experience climax, to episodic storytelling comprising many self-contained units read in various sequences. It caters to consumers' narrative experience from multiple angles, somewhat reminiscent of the 'story world' concept proposed by another transmedia storytelling theorist, Marie-Laure Ryan. She suggests [3,4,5] that this hypertextual navigation is an exploratory external narrative. Consumers are encouraged to seek new information and forge connections amidst scattered media content. In essence, in transmedia storytelling, audiences enjoy traversing various media to experience the narrative and delight in the process itself. Empirical studies on transmedia storytelling are abundant, spanning fields from education and film studies to urban cultural development.

In essence, transmedia storytelling is in a steady phase of development. After validation through commercial applications, the focus appears to be shifting from industry narratives toward fan discourses and academic discussions. Liang [6] identifies three distinguishing features of transmedia storytelling: the "intertextual storyworld", "expansive media adaptation", and "participatory audience migration". Ryan, in contrast, emphasizes "media-specificity" rooted in a foundation of "media

consciousness", underscoring the unique attributes of each medium within the transmedia spectrum. Such perspectives raise questions about the potentials and limitations of individual media: What can novels achieve that video games cannot, and vice versa?

The concept of "media mix" is introduced in this paper to analyze this case. Steinberg's studies indicate that a particular convergence model in Japan plays a pivotal role in transmedia storytelling, although he often approaches the subject from a commercial marketing and commodity semiotics perspective. Nakamura's analysis [7,8] reveals that the convergence strategy (transmedia storytelling) and divergence strategy (media mix) employed in series such as Gundam can complement each other. They might not represent opposing media strategies but could be interdependent designs. This Japanese convergence model, also known as the media mix [9], offers a unique perspective. The emergence of Japanese animated television in the 1960s as an interconnected system of media and commerce marked a significant turning point, laying the groundwork for what later became known as the media mix. This specific historical trajectory of the media mix illuminates the origins of the transmedia movement and demonstrates its tangible and intangible characteristics. It also accounts for the global trajectories of Japanese animations and their associated media forms, including manga, video games, action figures, trading cards, and the increasing inclusion of novels and live-action films.

Steinberg further notes that while the anime media mix began with regional development, its growth is closely tied to global shifts in capitalism during the post-Fordist era. At its core, the rise of the media mix corresponds with broader transformations in media consumption patterns. There is an increasing emphasis on consuming images, media texts, and related items, with consumption processes becoming faster and more pervasive. Consequently, the emergence of the media mix is intrinsically linked to societal, economic, and cultural shifts, leading many scholars to associate it with postmodernism or post-Fordism.

Steinberg [9] defines the media mix as the organic, comprehensive, and effective use of various advertising media based on advertising objectives. In the contemporary era of mass media development, using a single medium can hardly achieve advertising goals. It's a reflection of the increasing complexity of society, advancements in communication, and developments in advertising technology. Especially with the ubiquity of televisions, it's become imperative to use media according to their unique attributes, making media mix crucial in advertising plans. Today, with the widespread use of smart devices, modes of communication have evolved further. While most research focuses on commercial marketing in other media, fewer studies center on video games and anime as mediums. Some scholars have introduced the concept of a game mix [10]. This paper aims to fill this research gap by focusing on video games as the core text, exploring the properties related to the medium in this transmedia storytelling case. It reflects that, in today's multimodal communication environment, transmedia storytelling, as a postmodern narrative, aligns with this communication mode. It can serve as a marketing strategy and design approach in media production and game development.

3. Methodology

This study delves into the application and influence of media mix in the transmedia narrative cases of "Cyberpunk 2077" and "Cyberpunk Edgerunners." The primary research methodologies adopted are close reading and case study analysis. Utilizing close reading allows for a thorough scrutiny of narrative elements, themes, and stylistic attributes within both mediums. It further investigates how both maintain narrative and thematic coherence. Building on this foundational analysis, the research explores how media mix unfolds its cultural, social, and commercial impacts within this case. This examination draws from previous research and theoretical insights, offering an interpretation of the media mix phenomenon in this particular context.

In conducting this study, strict adherence to academic ethical principles was maintained, ensuring that all references and analyses aligned with scholarly standards and obtaining appropriate

permissions when necessary. The goal of this research is to provide a comprehensive and profound perspective on the role and implications of media mix in the "Cyberpunk 2077" and "Cyberpunk Edgerunners" transmedia narrative case.

4.   Transmedia Storytelling in the Cyberpunk Universe: Case Background

This paper examines the video game "Cyberpunk 2077" (2020) by CD Projekt Red and the animated series "Cyberpunk Edgerunners" (2022) produced by Studio Trigger. Both works are derived from Mike Pondsmith's tabletop role-playing game, "Cyberpunk 2013" (1988). Since its initial trailer in 2012, "Cyberpunk 2077" garnered significant attention, and as of this writing, it remains the only major AAA open-world role-playing game in a cyberpunk setting. However, its launch faced significant criticism due to severe bugs, optimization issues, and allegations of false advertising, reflecting internal management issues within the Polish game developer. Despite these challenges, the game's narrative and certain gameplay elements were noteworthy. The rationale behind this case study is to explore how it reclaimed commercial success through transmedia storytelling and the role and impact of merging video game and animation mediums.

"Cyberpunk Edgerunners" is an anime series based on CD Projekt Red's "Cyberpunk 2077", produced by Studio Trigger and overseen by CD Projekt, debuting on Netflix in September 2022. Set within the cyberpunk universe crafted by Mike Pondsmith, it serves as a prequel to the game, unfolding roughly a year prior to the events of "Cyberpunk 2077". While enriching the lore of Night City, it delves deeper into personal reflections within the cyberpunk culture. This melding of video game and animation was widely acclaimed. Notably, the cyberpunk culture draws inspiration from writers William Gibson, author of the iconic "Neuromancer", and Philip K. Dick, whose novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" and its film adaptation "Blade Runner", heavily influenced Mike Pondsmith's original tabletop creation.

Recent studies have indicated the escalating costs of video game development, pushing developers towards cost-effective mediums to augment the gaming experience. However, this approach has been met with skepticism by scholars, suggesting that it might prompt game companies to prioritize marketing tactics and cost-efficient narrative mediums, potentially compromising the quality of the game itself.

5.   Case Analysis

Since the 1980s, the term "media mix" has been the most widely used descriptor for transmedia phenomena, specifically referring to the development of media franchises across multiple types of media during a certain period. Essentially, it is what is known as "media mix" in North America, stemming from the Japanese term. "Cyberpunk 2077" is not the first installment of the entire series. It spans several media types, notably associated with gaming, such as the tabletop games "Cyberpunk 2020" and "Cyberpunk RED", along with their rulebooks. Before the official launch of "Cyberpunk 2077", offline events, trailers, comics, and soundtracks collectively constituted its media mix. The anime "Cyberpunk Edgerunners" marked a significant turning point, especially after the disastrous launch of the game. This anime drastically improved the game's reputation, ensuring that "Cyberpunk 2077" remains a topic of discussion in 2023.

Steinberg, through his research on "Astro Boy" and "The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya", identified three intersecting characteristics that define the anime media mix: deploying a text across multiple media, where the anime plays a pivotal role in popularizing the franchise; relying on other embodiments to sell works within the same franchise; and using characters to connect these media embodiments. The cross-media narrative of "Cyberpunk Edgerunners" demonstrates these characteristics. The anime played a pivotal role, and characters from "Edgerunners" also left traces

in the game, acting as symbols linking other games. This successful case study highlights the importance of interconnectivity over the distinctiveness and consistency of individual media.

Previously, the principle demonstrated in anime media mix revolved around the fusion of characters across media and object types, and the circulation of character imagery across multiple media forms. However, in the "Cyberpunk" sequence of this case study, the focus seems to have shifted towards circulating the story world across multiple media forms. "Cyberpunk Edgerunners" not only emphasized the circulation of the story world on streaming and imagery levels but also reintroduced the standout design of character imagery in the anime media mix. Characters like Lucy and David became focal points to attract users. Moreover, with the release of "Cyberpunk 2077's" latest DLC, "Shadows of the Past", players can find epitaphs in the game's graves left by the anime character Lucy for other characters.

While this intensive cross-media narrative strategy may seem disjointed at first glance, it exemplifies transmedia storytelling's hallmark as a postmodernist narrative. The game's world design and the retrospective anime media mix do not seem coherent in their narrative strategies. The former focuses on the setting of Night City, while the latter emphasizes character portrayals within that city, reflecting on the kinds of character arcs that street gangs might produce in such a technologically advanced yet morally bankrupt world. The anime's focus on intertextuality played a crucial role in complementing the game's narrative. The game and anime mutually promoted each other, and this mutual promotion became another text participating in the overall transmedia narrative, encouraging cross-consumption between the game and anime. This approach, termed as an "echo strategy", implies that consuming one product in a series can resonate with consumption of other media or commodities within that series. In addition to new audiences drawn to the game by the anime, many players who had already purchased the game returned after watching the anime, providing increased engagement. The ultimate antagonist of the anime, Adam Sledgehammer, also features as the final boss in the game, prompting many players to repeatedly return to the game and defeat him, avenging David and Rebecca.

Returning to the theory of transmedia storytelling, while the concepts of gameplay mix and media mix provide valuable insights into transmedia narratives, they primarily reveal the synergy between different media but neglect the differences. To understand the distinctions between media forms, this researcher introduces the concept of "narrative deficit". Examined from a medium-specific perspective, different media formats produce unique narrative deficits due to their specific characteristics and features. The nature of a medium limits the range of information and emotions it can convey. For instance, while music communicates emotion through sound, visual media like films use visual symbols but cannot directly transmit sound. Using literature and cinema as examples, literature delves deeper into characters' inner worlds and conveys emotions through words, while cinema combines sound, imagery, and action. However, films cannot access characters' thoughts as directly as literature, limiting their expressive potential. Similarly, while both comics and novels fall under literary arts, comics utilize visual elements, whereas novels rely on words to depict scenarios and psychological nuances. The interactive nature of games, in contrast, allows players to choose game progress and outcomes, often resulting in narrative dissonance, whereas films position audiences as passive observers.

For example, due to the intrinsic characteristics of electronic games and the production decisions in "Cyberpunk 2077", players struggle to fully immerse themselves in the game's universe. The growth of the protagonist, V, is merely quantified, depriving players of experiencing a genuine character arc. Furthermore, given its open-world nature and other design shortcomings, players miss out on the nuanced details of the Cyberpunk universe. As pointed out in a study on Final Fantasy by Bjarnason (2021), a grand city in the game was presented through linear CG animation for narrative purposes. The researcher posits that designing the city in detail would have been prohibitively

expensive, leading to the adoption of more controllable and established CG animation. While the incorporation of compelling anime plotlines undeniably helped "Cyberpunk 2077" navigate some criticisms, there's a looming risk. Such marketing approaches could tempt creators to prioritize cost-effective strategies, overlooking glaring issues in their products. "Cyberpunk 2077", already under fire for over-promotion, gameplay optimization, and design flaws, managed to regain attention and even appreciation through such the media mix.

6.   Conclusion

In the media mix model centered on electronic games, narratives, texts, and symbols from the game are extended into other traditional media, resulting in a unified work fragmented into multiple, independently consumable segments. The experience of the work no longer solely relies on traditional text appreciation like films or novels. It spans across media types and genres, including narrative media (films, books), non-narrative media (stickers, toys, advertisements), and other informational media. This description suggests a predominantly linear narrative approach. However, electronic games, as narrative media, exhibit a characteristic called narrative dissonance. This dissonance arises as humans, influenced by traditional linear narratives, anticipate a predetermined world outcome. Within a media mix centered on electronic games, there's a question about the emergence of postmodern production methods. Players construct a narrative world through fragmented story texts based on their interpretations, regardless of whether these texts are from the game itself or other media. Such a decentralized, unstructured narrative, emphasizing the importance of language and symbols, demonstrates a postmodern trend in the contemporary media mix. Masumi contends that "postmodernity" is the existence of the consumer/goods axis of capitalist relations at every point in socio-spatial-temporal dimensions, achieving a cohesive state. "Cohesion" refers to the dense proliferation of these goods within specific regions, like mainstream media culture.

This transformation makes it increasingly difficult to pinpoint an "original" work. Some comic and animation critics argue that an original work, or "Gensaku," was traditionally defined as the first version in a series of texts. For instance, a manga might be released first, followed by an animated or live-action adaptation, and then "related goods" like toys, stickers, or candies. Here, the manga serves as the original from which other media forms and products derive. This critic believes that media mix emerges precisely when the "original" becomes ambiguous. Not just when the original's position is blurred, but every embodiment of the convergence intensifies this ambiguity. Different audiences might engage with different originals, making time an essential metric in determining the original for varying groups.

The concept of media mix paves the way for more academic discourse in future media studies and product marketing. However, a looming concern for researchers is that this blurred originality can aid media corporations in recovering the sales and attention of failed works or in rebooting older, technology-limited yet popular works, like the Resident Evil game series. What's alarming is the potential for media companies to compromise audience rights, either by neglecting the quality of individual works or by enticing audiences into segmented purchases, promoting serial consumption.

Acknowledgments

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