Transmedia Storytelling in the Age of Digital Media:
East Asian Perspectives

Introduction

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Admitting to the explosion of transmedia storytelling based on Korean webtoons and Japanese manga/anime, this Special Section focuses on the emergence of East Asian transmedia storytelling, which is rapidly growing. As the outcomes of the June 2018 Vancouver conference, the papers included in this section commonly attempt to investigate the recent surge of webtoons and manga/anime as the sources of transmedia storytelling for East Asian popular culture. The primary purpose of this Special Section is to explore whether cultural products utilizing transmedia storytelling take a major role as the primary local cultural product in the Asian cultural market in the 21st century. Some of them also historicize the evolution of regional popular culture according to the surrounding digital media ecology, driving the change and continuity of the manhwa industry, now focusing on webtoons, over the past 15 years.

Keywords: *transmedia storytelling, webtoon, manga, animation, East Asia*

Transmedia storytelling has become one of the hottest media practices in the cultural industries in the early 21st century. The transmedia phenomenon—which is a remediation of one particular cultural form as original to other cultural forms—has become a very significant media trend in the global cultural industries. At the dawn of the 1940s, the U.S. film industry exploited other media in order to maintain a firm understanding of the products that were appealing to audiences (Freeman, 2015). Since then, *t*ransmedia storytelling has rapidly grown, but major elements have changed. The rise of each new medium—print, motion pictures, radio, television, and smartphone—introduced new forms of communication and entertainment, which triggers the development of the adaptation of media content based on novels and manhwas. However, the current multichannel and digital platform era furthermore gives rise to a new form of storytelling dubbed transmedia, which unfolds a narrative across multiple media channels. A single story may present some elements through a television series or a motion picture with additional narrative threads explored in comics, manhwas, and digital games (Knowledge@Wharton, 2012).

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In the early 21st century, East Asia became a major hub for transmedia storytelling due to Japanese manga, animation, and light novels, and later Korean webtoons (web comics). In Japan, many cultural forms like films and digital games have relied on manga and/or anime, and several Asian countries have utilized these cultural forms to develop their own films and television programs. South Korea (hereafter Korea) has also rapidly developed a new type of transmedia storytelling as webtoons have gained popularity. Several movies, such as *Secretly, Greatly* (2013); *Misaeng* (2013); *Inside Men* (2015), *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* (2017); and *Cheese in the Trap* (2018), which were transformed from webtoons, achieved huge success, and many film directors and television producers are vehemently developing webtoon-based cultural products. Tencent—a Chinese Internet-based technology and cultural enterprise—is also increasingly involved in the production of webtoons and has funded the production of webtoon-based digital game and animation.

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As the foundational basis for the articles in this Special Section, this introduction discusses the major characteristics of transmedia storytelling, which is currently booming in East Asia. The major aim here is to provide several key dimensions of webtoon and anime/manga-based transmedia storytelling to help readers understand the nature of these emerging transmedia practices as a new trend.

Major Characteristics of Transmedia Storytelling in the 21st Century

From Hollywood majors to small local cultural producers, transmedia storytelling has played a key role in producing contemporary cultural products. As several scholars (Freeman, 2017; Jenkins, 2006; Jin, 2013; Steinberg, 2012) point out, the nexus of media convergence and transmedia storytelling in the age of digital technologies has been conspicuous. Digital technologies and participatory culture have rapidly developed, and therefore, transmedia storytelling has gained momentum.

To begin with, transmedia as a combination of "trans" and "media" implies that several media, including film, broadcasting, manga, animation, webtoon, and games converge beyond their independent medium boundaries (Cho, 2018, p. 310). As Evans (2011) points out, "transmediality describes the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information concerning a single fictional world through a range of textual forms" (p. 1). In particular,

transmedia storytelling is the technique of telling a single story across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies. From a production standpoint, transmedia storytelling involves creating content that engages an audience using various techniques to permeate their daily lives. (Ram, 2016, para. 2)

Freeman (2017) also points out that

at the present moment, therefore, it is digital platforms that most emphatically and most frequently build fictional story worlds across media; online promoters exploit digital tools like social media and film websites to plant in-universe artefacts about a given story world. (p. 32)

As these scholars emphasize, the convergence of popular content and digital technology has been increasing, and in this regard, Jeff Gomez, CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, states, "transmedia storytelling is something that the Digital Age is now demanding of us all" (Hughes, 2013, para. 41). Unlike old forms of transmedia storytelling, contemporary transmedia storytelling has been deeply related to digital media, including platform technologies, which will continue to grow, although there are still nondigital parts that play a role in transmedia storytelling practices.

In addition, transmedia storytelling can be understood not only as the flow of story from the original text to several different platforms, but also as the expansion and/or compression of the original story to fit into each platform's unique attributes (Jin, 2019). In other words, transmedia storytelling also involves text, characters, and visual images (Jin, 2019; Shige, 2019; Steinberg, 2012). Transmedia is not simply retelling the same story through a different medium, as in adapting a book to film. Nor is it just franchising, involving merely sequel after sequel. Rather, at the heart of transmedia storytelling is the interactive "storyworld"— the process of expanding stories beyond one particular medium to diverse platforms (Jenkins, 2006; Park, 2016), which blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction, creator and audience, narrative and nonnarrative (Prior, 2013, para. 7).

Meanwhile, as Phillips (2012) and Cho (2018) point out, transmedia storytelling is different from cross-media storytelling or OSMU (one source, multiuse) because it not only adapts and/or slightly modifies the original text but also provides new stories. For example, *Twilight* and *The Lord of the Rings* movies can be categorized as cross-media, as they simply adapt the original novels. In contrast to this, *Avengers* can be identified as transmedia storytelling, as the movie is much different from the original graphic novel in stories and characters while continuing to expand the storyworld through diverse media platforms.

Asia had shown a relatively weak tradition in transmedia storytelling over the past several decades; however, it has become a norm in the local cultural industries in East Asia, including Japan, Korea, and China, as both popular culture and digital technologies have greatly grown. Based on manga/anime, Japan developed digital storytelling as many Japanese film directors and television producers adapted media products into a big-screen production. As is well documented, Japanese manga has long been the center of transmedia practices in the Japanese cultural industries, followed by a few Asian countries.

> There are several reasons why the adaptation of manga has become such a popular custom. First, manga sources can save time and money by acting as blueprints for the planning and development of a franchise. Secondly, a manga original can act as a storyboard during the production process, allowing investors and production staff to easily create adaptations and advance towards a clear collective goal. (Joo, Denison, & Furukawa, n.d., p. 16)

Adaptation from manga into live-action films and TV dramas indeed has a long history. Cinema has increasingly had to compete with television to become the core medium of adaptation from manga originals. Cinema received new attention as an adaptation vehicle for manga originals across the same period, with the aid of increasing numbers of new multiplex cinema screens. Thus, direct adaptation into live-action films became a popular trend in the mid-2000s (Joo et al., n.d., pp. 17–19).

In the Korean context, webtoons have become popular, and many cultural industry corporations, such as film, broadcasting, and gaming companies, have developed their cultural products based on webtoons. Thanks to their popularity, many webtoons, including the works of Kang Full and Yoon Taeho, have been made into movies and television dramas. From political dramas to murder thrillers, these movies show off diverse genres and styles (Jin, 2015, p. 203). Cultural creators like film directors, drama producers, and game designers have paid deep attention to webtoons for their own cultural forms. For them, webtoons as the original source content are easy to adapt to another cultural form, like film, television drama, games, and musicals, and therefore, transmedia storytelling based on webtoons has blurred the boundaries between genres, platforms, and even entertainment. In other words, "transmedia storytelling is either a storytelling strategy or the world that crosses the multiple media and genre by expansion of story world to extend, strengthen and spread the enjoyment" (Park, 2016, p. 116).

As a reflection of the growth of Korean webtoons, many cultural creators, including filmmakers in East Asia, have rapidly developed their cultural content based on webtoons. Chinese and Korean film versions of the fantasy love story *The Witch*—based on webtoonist Kang Full's original story—were underway as part of a coproduction deal between Korea's NEW and China's Huace (Lee, H., 2017). Tencent's QQ, a Chinese online content provider, published *Undead King*, a Korean comic, and Mileland, the company that brought *Undead King* to China, was in negotiations with Chinese companies to produce video games with characters from the same webtoon in 2015 (Lee, S., 2015). The popularity of Korean webtoons has been rapidly rising, spilling into dramas, movies and games in Korea, followed by several East Asian countries. As of June 2015, more than 50 webtoons were already recreated into more value-added movies, dramas, and games, and the trend has continued (Kim, 2015).

> While Korean TV dramas draw inspiration from varied sources, webtoons are one of the most popular sources of inventive storylines. This in-demand form of instant entertainment began in Korea in the early 2000s and now attracts international attention, alongside other forms of Korean pop culture, at least partly because of the dramas and films it inspires. (MacDonald, 2019, para. 2)

Although adaptations do not always please global fans.

Above all, it is crucial to investigate whether East Asia will continue to develop local-based transmedia storytelling, and therefore, we have to carefully contemplate the future of storytelling. Manga/anime and webtoons certainly become transmedia platforms that create a vicious cycle in which manga and/or cartoon characters and stories can move into television, film, and digital games. Manga and webtoons are now treasure troves of original stories. They come with an established fanbase, and the format itself is a narrative and visual map that the producers can use as a foundation (Song, 2016, para 3.). In fact, many film producers and corporations like well-made manhwas and webtoons because they are able to understand detailed information for movies and digital games because of their detailed pictures. The discussion of transmedia storytelling based on manga/animation and webtoon will shed light on the extension of the current debates on transmedia storytelling in these cultural industries.

Works Included in This Special Section

Dal Yong Jin historicizes the emergence of snack culture. By employing media convergence supported by transmedia storytelling as a major theoretical framework alongside historical and textual analyses, he divides the evolution of snack culture—in particular webtoon culture—becoming big-screen culture, into three major periods according to the surrounding new media ecology. Then, he examines the ways in which webtoons become one of the major resources for transmedia storytelling. Finally, he addresses the reasons why small snack culture becomes big-screen culture with the case of *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds*, which has transformed from a popular webtoon to a successful big-screen movie. As there has been little research about sociocultural reasons for the growth of webtoons as snack culture and its influence in big-screen culture, he attempts to provide new empirical analysis on this emerging trend in the early 21st century.

Barbara Wall's article uses *The Journey to the West* as a case to discuss the dynamic nature of transmedia storytelling, which is often promoted as the future of storytelling. By employing Henry Jenkins' notion of transmedia storytelling, she shows how it is a transmedia story that started to unfold hundreds of years ago. She analyzes the ways in which *The Journey to the West,* which is conventionally identified with a Chinese novel, has transformed into other media content so that most people are familiar with *The Journey* universe through films, comics, or computer games. Barbara suggests that, by approaching them as what Roland Barthes calls dynamic texts, we can develop tools for comprehension and analysis, although Jenkins (2011) argues that transmedia stories are too broad to be grasped. In this article, she demonstrates how such a tool might work by applying Barthes' concept to Korean variations of *The Journey,* and in particular by using tree diagrams and an animation to create a visual map of the story's elements.

Ju Oak Kim's article uses the Korean reality TV franchise *New Journey to the West* (*NJW*), to unpack how Korean media industries have initiated transmedia and intertextual experiences in the realm of reality television. This article spotlights Young-seok Na, television director of *NJW*, who has developed locally engaged transmedia storytelling, revamping characters and episodes from his previous works, coalescing Korean television channels and online streaming sites, and integrating a Chinese classic and its Japanese manga adaptation into a Korean reality show franchise. By analyzing the six seasons of *NJW* (tvN), its prequel, *2Days and 1Night* (KBS2), and its spinoff series, *Kang's Kitchen* (tvN) and *Youth over Flowers* (tvN), this article proposes that the aura of a reality show director as a storyteller is essential in creating a transmedia entertainment brand and, more importantly, in engendering regionally bound transmedia storytelling.

Jane Yeahin Pyo. Minji Jang, and Tae-Jin Yoon's article "Dynamics Between Agents in the New Webtoon Ecosystem in Korea" analyzes many different forces and agents that shaped the webtoon ecosystem into what it looks like as of today. The article addresses the ways in which the structure is constantly evolving, as the webtoon is gaining great popularity in and out of Korea and the number of different agents entering the production field is growing. Starting off with an observation of how the webtoon ecosystem was structuralized, this article attempts to portray the lives of agents residing in the large structure of webtoon ecosystem. It identifies webtoon creators, producers, and platform companies as three core agents that constitute the production field. Based on nine in-depth interviews with each agent, the article aims to capture their vivid experiences based on identity and power relations. Agents interacted with and benefited from each other, but also struggled for power. Moreover, as the webtoon ecosystem is greatly influenced by transmedia and transnationalism, the authors attempt to show how agents are responding to structural changes created by these two (sociocultural) waves.

Ji Hoon Park and Yongsuk Lee's article examines why Korean TV producers use webtoons for dramas, focusing on industrial factors leading to dramatization of the webtoon. It finds that several key industrial factors lead to webtoon-based TV drama production: the big success of earlier webtoon-based dramas (e.g., *Misaeng*, *Cheese in the Trap*), the limited pool of top drama scriptwriters, the use of the webtoon as a cost-saving option (as opposed to hiring a top scriptwriter), the strategy of reducing the risk of hiring a mediocre scriptwriter, the use of the webtoon as a deal point when production companies set out to pitch a show, and the effectiveness of promoting TV dramas on the basis of the existing reputation of a webtoon. It emphasizes that the proliferation of the mobile phone and the migration of traditional cartoonists to the mobile platform contribute to the emergence of the webtoon as a reservoir of creative stories, and therefore, it concludes that industrial factors and considerations promote the practice of webtoon-based drama production.

Shige (CJ) Suzuki's article analyzes "*Yōkai* Monsters at Large." This article engages in a discussion of *yōkai* (preternatural monsters in Japanese folklore) characters in Mizuki Shigeru's manga and their transmedia expansion not as an expression of Japanese cultural tradition, but as an outcome of transmedia adaptation practices in the modern period by creators, media companies, and other social agents. It argues that recent Japanese transmedia practices are principally propelled by the specific style of character drawing found in the manga medium and the character-centric multimedia production scheme, which makes manga(-originated) characters, including yōkai characters, versatile for moving across different media platforms. By analyzing the transmedia practices that have used Mizuki's yōkai manga as "original" sources, this article addresses what has been gained and lost when yōkai are migrated into different media platforms.

Dal Yong Jin's feature on "Korean Webtoonist Yoon Tae Ho" focuses on history, the webtoon industry, and transmedia storytelling through his interview with Yoon Tae Ho. Webtoonist Yoon Tae Ho delivered a keynote speech at the conference titled "Asian Transmedia Storytelling in the Age of Digital Media" held in Vancouver, Canada, on June 8–9, 2018. This article organizes its discussion into two major sections: Yoon's keynote speech in the first part and the interview in the second part, so that readers are able to get very engaging and interesting perspectives on webtoons and transmedia storytelling. This feature organizes Yoon's talk into several major subcategories based on key dimensions. It expects that this kind

of unusual documentation of the most famous webtoonist will shed light on our discussions on Korean webtoons and their transmedia storytelling prospects.

Finally, Bruce Fulton's feature discusses "The Multimedia Life of a Korean Graphic Novel," focusing on Yoon Taeho's *Ikki.* In this paper, he suggests that the multimedia life of the Korean graphic novel *Ikki* exemplifies the prospects for Korean graphic novels both at home and abroad. He discusses Yoon Taeho's utilization and engagement with the highly developed Internet infrastructure in Korea, as well as the success of *Ikki* as a work of creative writing that resonates strongly with the trauma and abuse of power that have characterized much of contemporary Korean history. Bruce anticipates that the multimedial opportunities enjoyed by Korean graphic novels today, combined with the translation of representative works into languages such as English, Japanese, and Chinese, will allow these works to take their place alongside better-known components of Hallyu that are increasingly driving popular cultural production worldwide.

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