

## Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands II

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The Japanese entertainment industry has a history of using a single continuous narrative to cross multiple media formats, so that a storyline begins in a television anime, cliffhangers, begins again as a novel, cliffhangers, begins again as a videogame, cliffhangers, and begins as a movie (notable successes of this are *Martian Successor Nadesico* and *Heroic Legend of Arslan*). *The Matrix* employed a similar strategy with the animatrix and the videogame; both added more to the story between movies one and two and were referenced in the second movie. And this just makes good marketing sense. A tremendous amount of capital and time is invested into the creation of a brand, and through constant adaptation, the brand is kept alive. This practice, however, does raise a series of questions:

*1. Does this type of multi-media narrative privilege a type of post-modern fragmentation of the narrative? Or, in having a single narrative that connects all of these media together, is this type of storytelling (re)privileging narrative in an age where media and discourse fragment authorial intention, such as what occurs in hypertext?*

Audiences can choose to only participate in one aspect of the narrative—watch only the anime or read only the manga, for example. Indeed, in some cases, audiences do not have access to additional components of the narrative. For example, neither the videogames nor the novels of *Martian Successor Nadesico* are available in English. In this way, fragmentation seems to work well—audiences have the adaptive “joy of recognition” without the long-term commitment to the narrative.

Conversely, the narrative itself appears to be the glue that holds the attention of the audience over the lifespan of the brand. The narrative, then, compels audiences to switch media with the narrative, investing where needed. People who may only be computer gamers, for example, are convinced by the end of the game to switch to the novel to experience the narrative in its entirety. In this way, the narrative is a rhetorical device that ensures prolonged and dedicated followings. It also appears to require the narrative to adhere to a strict linear structure of “and then... and then...” in order to ensure temporal urgency: a “what’s going to happen next” strategy most commonly employed in serial publications and television serials.

*2. When several media serve a single, linear narrative, how does this practice affect aesthetic choices?*

Understandably, when a manga cliffhangers and is taken up again in anime, the audience expects the drawing style to be similar. Manga and anime both share a common history as hand-drawn sequential art, so this is not a difficult aesthetic collapse. What is interesting to note here is that the anime will affect the computer game and the novel and even the live action movie. This is interesting because each of these media have strengths and weaknesses that are not necessarily shared.

The effect of this aesthetic collapse can be simultaneously expansive and limiting. For example, the innovations in computer animation are often held in check by the expectations derived from comic books and the anime based on those comics. And even more interestingly, the descriptive practices of novels written for these multimodal narratives often focus on the information contained in a pictorial scene such as a comic frame or animation cell, not on the inner life of the characters. In other words, the author will explain that a close up of the character allows the protagonist to see the sadness on her face as she looks down and to the right, her hair blowing listlessly in the breeze. A verbal match to the visual counterpart in another part of the narrative told in another medium.

### *3. What about issues of access?*

This type of continuous-narrative story telling, while engaging and fascinating, presents the audience with a number of challenges. Most obviously is the economic burden. For a person to “read” the entire Matrix story, for example, that person must have access to the DVDs (four in total—three movies and a series of animated shorts), a player, a game console, and the computer game. And then that person needs the time and skills to navigate all of the narrative points.

This problem is compounded by globalization. As anime has become more popular in the US and Canada, a number of anime and manga have been translated and brought to market. However, a large number of these stories have other mediated components that are either outdated (Dreamcast games that were contemporary when the original narrative was published) or simply too expensive to translate and bring to market, such as the novels. Therefore, audiences are left with a feeling that more should be coming and sometimes attribute it to a Japanese aesthetic of “flawed and unfinished” when, in fact, many of these narratives are finished with tidy conclusions.