The Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise

A Case Study of Transmedia Storytelling Practices and Ludo Mix in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The present article looks at the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise
and the role of digital games from the conceptual framework of
transmedia storytelling and its relation to the ludo mix. We offer a
historical account of the role of digital games in the development
of "*the Mobile Suit Gundam*" series from a portfolio perspective,
and show how a combination of various types of game genres, or
otherwise 'ludo mix', played a role in enhancing the franchise's
convergent and divergent strategies, which contributed to the
success of the series. Our case can show some insight into the
importance of adopting a macro-level portfolio approach when

considering specific game design choices in the overall ludo mix within the franchise.

Keywords

Transmedia Storytelling, Media mix, Ludo mix, Business Strategy

INTRODUCTION

In the context of media production, the idea of transmediality is now more relevant than ever. With the global proliferation of broadband internet services, the number of over-the-top (OTT) media services is rising on a global scale. Along with such a drastic change in the media ecology, people's new media consuming habits are playing a central role in the development of emerging media platforms. Disney Plus, for instance, houses exclusive titles such as *Star Wars: The Mandalorian,* which is considered a "signature series" by top management (Hayes, 2020). As Hurely's (2020) essay argues, many viewers were attracted by the final season of the CG Television series *Star Wars Clone Wars,* another Disney Plus exclusive, for its potential to fill the gaps between the timelines of the *Star Wars* Universe. Among future programs, some of the most anticipated TV shows in Disney Plus are *Wanda Vision* and *Loki,* both of which are a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Other OTT services are no exception in their strategies. Amazon Prime, which is currently filming a prequel series to *The Lord of the Rings,* also secured the global distribution rights for *Star Trek Picard.* Netflix, while initially focused on extending *Marvel Cinematic Universe* by creating such shows as *Daredevil, The Punisher* and *Jessica Jones,* among others, before the coming of Disney Plus, now has moved on to create a new TV series based on the film, *The Dark Crystal.* Netflix has also secured the global distribution rights for *Star Trek Discovery,* which is also expanding another side of *Star Trek* Universe in its unique way.

Transmedia storytelling refers to "a process where integral elements of 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[1]." However, there seems to be less emphasis on integrating digital games into the mix. Even the Producers Guild of America did not explicitly specify 'digital games' as a part of the definition of a transmedia narrative upon ratifying a new title "transmedia producer" in 2010 [2].

Nonetheless, digital games are one of the essential media today. Game apps for smartphones or AAA game titles developed for online play, as well as console game platforms, are an invaluable part of people's daily lives. There is no doubt that media convergence has now become an everyday reality for people around the globe.

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 by developing digital games in a strategy to expand the overall portfolio of their media franchise. Building upon our work (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019), we propose to look at the conception and development of the Japanese *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise from a macro-level portfolio perspective, to assess the role of the ludo mix within a transmedial franchise.

1. Jenkins, H 2007 "Transmedia Storytelling 101" *Henry Jenkins Official Blog* <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html> (Sep 10 2018 Access).
2. 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).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A whole academic field has emerged and developed around the concept of transmediality. Freeman & Gambaratto's compilation (2018) shows how the concept has expanded over a broader area of academic disciplines in these years. For the present study, however, we examine transmediality exclusively from a macro-level portfolio perspective. In what follows, we will examine the role of the ludo mix, the term coined by the conference organizers during the DiGRA 2019 Conference.
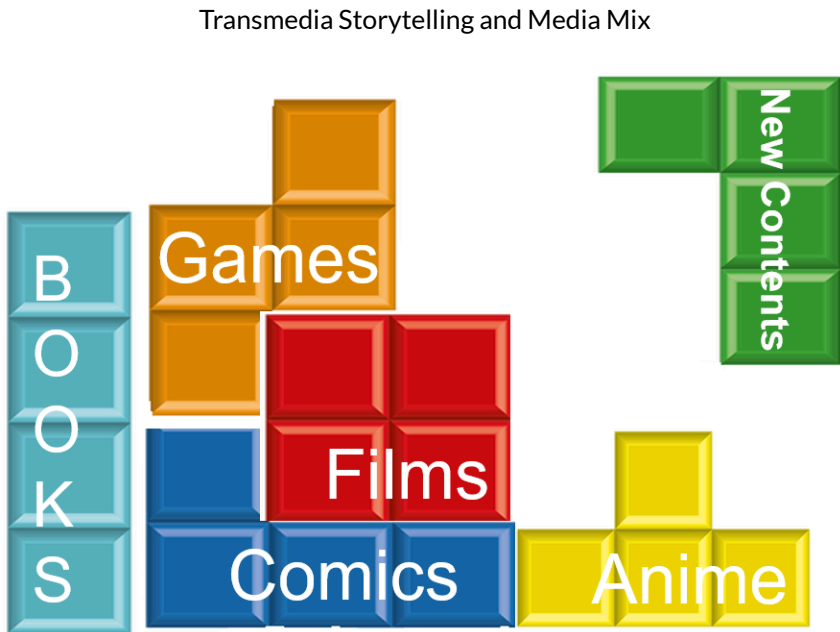
Transmedia Storytelling and Media Mix

Figure 1: Conceptual model of transmedia storytelling based on Pratten's analogy.

In our previous work, we attempted to clarify the concept of transmedia storytelling to make it analytically operational. We built upon the definitions proposed by Henry Jenkins (2003, 2006 and 2007), Jeff Gomez (2018), and an analogy proposed by Robert Pratten (2011) shown in Figure 1 (Nakamura and Tosca 2019). In

"classic" transmedia storytelling, every new instantiation extends a fiction in either time, space or in some cases, alternative dimensions. In transmedia storytelling, when each instantiation is added, various elements in the story universe need to be expanded without contradicting previous instantiations. Audiences are also expected to evaluate each instantiation from such a perspective, and in some cases, they will openly protest if they feel the transmedia universe's underlying rules are violated.[3] Such an open process is quite natural, considering the fact that the universe created for transmedia storytelling is intentionally designed in a way that allows spectators to immerse themselves in their favorite worlds by reproducing the mythos, topos, and ethos of the created instantiations (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004). Thus, IP holders that obscure the elements that sustain the popularity of the fictional universe usually receive negative fan response. In Japan, the practice similar to transmedia storytelling has been called "media mix." Marc Steinberg defines the media mix as "the cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises" (Steinberg: 2012a: viii)[4]. While media mix, just as transmedia storytelling, creates various works across media platforms, a majority of media mix products prefer a divergent model where

3. There are numerous examples of fan uproar when new transmedia products fail to meet their worldness expectations. For example, when the *Fantastic Beasts* movie introduced the word *nomajs* for those who can´t do magic, and who until now in the Harry Potter universe had been called *muggles,* the fans were extremely upset: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/06/muggles-jk-rowling-fantastic-beasts-and-where-to-find-them-american-term-non-wizards.

4. Steinberg 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), and the definition provided in this article is the artistic one.   This concept was further confirmed during the semi-structured interview by Nakamura (2017) with the Yokai Watch project team's brand manager in the USA, Natsumi Fujigiwa asking the differences between transmedia storytelling approaches to those of Yokai Watch (so-called cross-media). She pointed out that Yokai Watch focuses on surrounding fans with various IP-related products while creating more touchpoints for newcomers to a ground of products. The figure reflects on Fujigiwa's explanation.

variations from the central world are accepted, which is substantially different from transmedia storytelling (as it basically restricts a serialized work within the premises of consistent world building, even if that may imply additive complexity). This concept is illustrated in Figure 2:
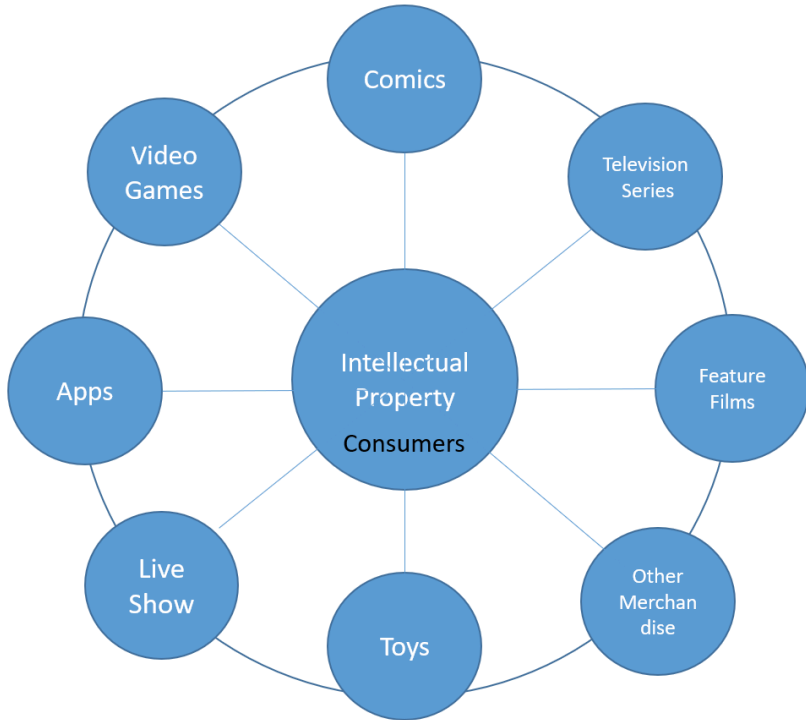

Figure 2: Conceptual model of media mix

Digital games in transmedia storytelling and the media mix

Digital games play an important role in both transmedia storytelling and the Japanese media mix. Kinder, which coined the expression "*commercial transmedia supersystem*" (1991), was inspired by observing avid youth consuming their favorite characters across multiple media platforms indiscriminately, including video games, even though at that time, video games were an emerging medium with limited graphic and sound capabilities. Jenkins also indicated that the young who were used to consuming

such a product as *Pokémon* would also become enthusiast consumers of transmedia storytelling products (2003). Since then, several scholars have examined the role of digital games within transmedia storytelling. Lachman, for example, shows how mini-games can be integrated as part of a transmedial educational project, in relation to the hard-science documentary mini-series, *Race to Mars,* produced by Discovery Channel Canada and launched as a core component (2010). Also, Wiik has examined transmedia projects in which games appear as central components of the franchise, and concluded that consumers who are motivated to consume game-centric transmedia franchises may have a different motivation than those who consume TV dramas or TV series, noting consumers' desire for immersion, in particular (2019). Just as in transmedia storytelling, video games served an important role in the media mix. Digital games developed in Japan have been considered as a part of the "media mix" ecosystem since the early days of the video game industry itself (Picard 2013; Navarro & Loriguillo 2015). While some academic papers have started scrutinizing these phenomena (i.e. Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon eds, 2015), others examine a certain franchise as a case study (Nakamura and Tosca 2019; Ernest Dit Alban, 2020).

The conceptual framework of the Ludo Mix

While previous studies examine the role of video games within transmedial franchises, a majority of them have focused on how the games were positioned within the entire franchise, with some notable exceptions. Hutchinson, for instance, examined several renowned game titles to investigate the transmediality of Japanese games, and concluded that digital games can be transmedial within one single gaming experience (2019, 69). The study by Hutchison, however, is very much focused on specific content, and did not explore the relational aspect of how various game mechanisms and playing elements constitute a gaming experience as a whole. The Ludo mix concept – proposed at DiGRA 2019 – addresses an unexplored dimension in digital game research. In the introduction

section of DiGRA 2019, the conference organizers proposed the theme "Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix" as follows:

> Ludo mix may include several versions of the games or several different games together with other content thus resulting in novel media ecologies, business models and development of consumption cultures.

The ludo mix is thus a relational concept. That is, it does not operate at a single game level, but focuses on the relations that are established between games belonging to the same franchise, or between games and the other products of the franchise (anime, manga, etc.). As digital games have become ever more expansive, adopting a 'ludo mix' perspective that focuses on the relational side of the gaming experience is, we argue, vital in determining the overall experience of game narratives, as well as the roles the games play in the entire media franchise. But how to tackle this relational level analytically? Previous theoretical frameworks may provide a key to examine games from a ludo mix perspective, particularly those that attempt to classify games according to a genre division. As is well known, Roger Caillois categorizes games into four groups, namely, agon (Competition), alea (Chance), mimicry (Simulation) and ilinx (Vertigo). In his typology, each category affords a different gaming experience depending where the play is positioned on the continuum of the forms of play. The most spontaneous and improving activities, which are free from all restrictions, are termed *paidia*, while those activities expected to observe explicit and rigid regulations are called *ludus* (Callios 1961). Since then, various scholars have proposed classifications of games and simulation according to different criteria. Klabbers, for example, introduced several classifications regarding games and simulations (2003). Vossen proposed a classification that would cover physical games to games of sports, along with digital games (2004). The classifications proposed in these works may be too abstract to be directly adapted to the present study, with its portfolio focus. Nevertheless, they are relevant to us in that they point to the

fact that the diverse genres afford different gaming experiences that might be preferred by different kinds of players. A typology that gets closer to common industry labels is that of Dahlskog, Kamstrup and Aarseth, who narrow their focus to digital games, and propose four categories: 1) Strategy, 2) First-person shooters, 3) Progression and exploration games, and 4) Perfect information games (2009). Examining various games, the authors offered the important insight that these classifications should be modified over time, as new technologies are introduced in gaming experience (Ibid). An even more recent scrutiny on game genres has been undertaken by Heintz and Law, who propose the following labels: 1) Mini-game, 2) Action, 3) Adventure, 4) Role-play and 5) Resource, and add nine elements that add depth to the classification, which are a) Player, b) Input/Output devices, c) Actions, d) Challenges, e) Goals, f) Rewards, g) Setting, h) Perspective, and i) Structure (Heintz and Law, 2015). Any single game could be examined using these nine elements, in order to find out which genre it belongs to.

These approaches are useful to our ludo mix investigation, as they point to the differences between game experiences being conclusive. Truly, what is most inspiring to us here is their systemic ambition, that is, the different categories make sense only in relation to each other. It is not by chance that the ludo mix definition includes the expression "media ecology" as a metaphoric framework for a vision of how different entities can co-exist; we will return to this later. The ludo mix approach advocates for a situated perspective in which the significance of each game is considered against the backdrop of the whole network of products. This is related to genre (for instance, if we consider that a strategy game is such because it lets the player do something different than a first-person shooter), but there is something more. That is, when adopting the ludo mix perspective, not only do we care about game affordances, but also about how the game is a part of the transmedial universe. To scrutinize this dimension, we propose to use the categories of *convergent, divergent* and *hybrid*, which we explain below. The reasoning

behind this extra analysis dimension is that the different games in the ludo mix both afford different kinds of gameplay *and* actualize the transmedial universe in different ways.

Analysis method

The ludo mix perspective could arguably also be examined by conducting an in-depth close reading analysis of one or a few games, in a micro perspective. Various open-world games, MMORPGs and large-scale role-playing games can include multiple game mechanics. This would throw light on the combinations of ludic elements that constitute meaningful gaming experiences within a game. However, in order to contribute to ongoing dialogues regarding transmedial strategy that focus instead on the sustainability of a franchise, we have here chosen to explore the ludo mix from a macro perspective, that is, at the franchise portfolio level, to investigate how the digital games section of the franchise contributed to the extension of the entire franchise.

First, we consider the games in chronological order, with emphasis on how genre has been dispersed and/or concentrated, depending on each of the platforms for which the games are developed. We will also consider the games, depending on their popularity, in order to determine which genres tend to be embraced by fans. At the portfolio level, "popularity" equals sales numbers (both for games and/or related products) or notable media coverage, since we are not investigating the specific aesthetic experiences here, but only how the franchise evolves and survives (to continue with the ecological metaphors). In order to analyze relevant trends, we looked at video game titles that were featured in Weekly Famitsu from 1986 until the end of 2019, which are archived in the f-ism game database created by KADOKAWA Game Linkage (hereafter Famitsu Group); in other words, the software considered for this analysis are games developed for game-dedicated platforms. In classifying the titles, we first excluded any titles that were repackaged as special or discounted versions for the same

platforms, as these versions are completely the same, in terms of game design, as the original. Since our focus was on games launched for the game-dedicated platforms (either for console or mobile), those games that were developed as PC game software, online games, arcades, mobile game services, game apps, or virtual reality experience were excluded from the present study. There were several titles which were download-only titles, distributed in a given game platforms' network services. These were also excluded. Furthermore, any of the games that were repackaged as retro games (such as game archive collections or a mini-series) were also excluded. We have adopted the genre classification used by Famitsu group, since the terms they used in categorizing the games were quite generic and therefore easier to translate. We also looked in the Media Arts database created by the Agency of Cultural Affairs, Japan (https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/), to evaluate our list. After this process, there was a total of 162 titles on the list (if 18 titles, which resulted from the simultaneous release of one game to multiple platforms, are included, the number of the titles is 180).

OUR CASE: *THE MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM* FRANCHISE

The *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise[5], a media franchise initiated as a science fiction anime series for television, first aired on April 7th, 1979. The franchise gradually expanded to feature anime film adaptations, original video animation, digital games, comics and novels, among other products. The most popular merchandise products were plastic scale models of robots, which were called 'mobile suits' within the story universe. The main plot depicts the armed conflict between two factions: the Earth Federation with headquarters located on earth, and the Principality of Zeon: a group of space colonies that declared their independence. The conflicts started in the (fictional) Universal Century 0079. The franchise initially followed the conflicts of these global alliances in

5. Unless otherwise noted, the subsequent sections are based on Nakamura and Tosca (2019).

the Universal Century, but the producers of the franchise, realizing that the extension of the story universe only pleased existing fans, created *Super Deformed Gundam,* or the *SD Gundam* series, in 1985. A study by Nakamura and Tosca (2019) found that creating the *SD Gundam* series brought back the younger audiences, and as a result, extended the lifecycle of the franchise. After this successful initiative, and considering the fact that the Bandai group (the manufacturer of *Gundam* plastic models and other toy-related merchandise) acquired Sunrise in 1994, a new televised anime series adopted the divergent model. In this new series, only *Gundam* and its designs [6] were used as reminiscence of the first *Gundam* series, while everything else, such as the development of the main characters and the world setting were vastly different from the previous titles (except for *Mobile Suit Gundam Seed* and *Gundam Seed Destiny).* In the meantime, other media products such as OVAs, special short 3D CG

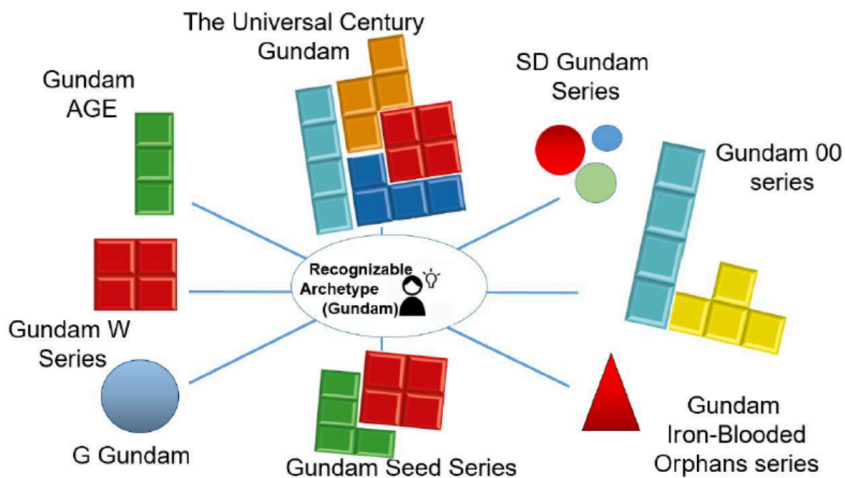*Figure 3: In the Gundam franchise, convergent approaches and divergent approaches to the franchise complement one another*

cinematic experiences and the VR experience, continued to build on the Universal Century universe. With each new world that was created, new merchandise and other media products were

6. Based on a book written by Kenji Inomata in (1995. p134).

also launched, based on these new intellectual properties, as conceptualized in Figure 3.

Nakamura and Tosca's (2019) analysis revealed that *Gundam's* convergent strategies (transmedia storytelling) and divergent strategies (media mix) can be complementary, and that they are design possibilities that depend on each other, rather than two opposite kinds of media strategies, each with their territorial origins. In subsequent sections, we will assess the functions of the ludo mix in such a complicated media portfolio as that of the *Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise*.

The Role of Ludo Mix in the *Gundam Franchise*

After scrutinizing the games for the selected 162 titles, we realized that these games could be categorized based on the divergent-convergent dichotomy, in relation to the mythos-topos and ethos of the Universal Century universe. This classification was done succinctly, based on our playing knowledge, but mostly on the documentation available about the games. We also investigated various 'explain' and 'let's play' videos on the individual games, which are available on video sharing sites, as well as Wiki Strategy Guides, which go through all dimensions of the games in elaborate detail. We categorized the games whose main game mode was designed to contribute to the extension of the Universal Century universe as convergent. As for those games that are not part of the Universal Century, those that only use characters from the Universal Century to represent avatars in the games, or games set in the Universal Century universe, but introduce alternative content that does not amount to an addition or extension of the canonic story world, we categorize these as divergent.

In this process, we realized that some of the games are not clear-cut in their game design. Thus, we added a new category, that of *hybrid* for those games that have some portions and/or game mode that extends the story world. We also separate the games that use *Super Deformed Gundam* mecha and other deformed Gundam

character designs from the regular ones for the purpose of our analysis, although they should all be categorized as divergent in a convergent-divergent dichotomy categorization. We also realized that some games were released for several platforms simultaneously, with no modification except for some graphic upgrades. We will maintain these numbers in platform analyses, but exclude redundancy for convergent-divergent categorical and genre analyses. Table 1-3 shows a summary of the data used.

	Total	SD	SD (%)	Regular	Reg. (%)	Divergent	Diver. (%)	Convergent	Conver.(%)	Hybrid	Hybrid (%)
Unique	162	69	42.6%	93	57.4%	52	(32.1%)	11	(6.8%)	30	(18.5%)
Redundant	18	4		14		9		0		5	
					100%		*57.29%*		*11.46%*		*31.25%*
Total	180	73		107		61		11		35	

Table 1 Numbers based on convergent-divergent-hybrid and SD (Divergent)

The Origin of the Gundam Game Franchise

Before going over the results, we will briefly introduce the origin of the *Gundam* games. According to the Media Arts database, four titles were released before the first games were released for the Family Computer (hereafter, Famicom). The first digital games for the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise were released in 1983 for the cartridge-changeable game platform, Emerson Arcadia. At that time, Bandai had the regional rights to sell this product; thus, Gundam was released along with several other titles. This was followed by *Gundam*: *Runatsu No Tatakai* (*The Battle of Luna II*) in 1984 for PC-8801. Both of these titles were 2D shooting games, using simple pixel art with a slight resemblance to *Gundam* characters and vehicles[7]. Then, an adventure game series followed for the PC-8801 series, following the main scenario of the first *Gundam*. But these games didn´t really bring anything new to the Universal Century World. They were targeted toward existing fans, and allowed them to revisit their beloved universe through engagement in immersive, repetitive play. These products fall

7. 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.

within Kennedy´s categorization of typical transmedia games in the West, which, as he notes, tend to be secondary products to the source, that either simply use popular characters in a generic gaming environment like shooting, puzzle, etc., or roughly adapt the main story line of core content, with low degrees of interactivity (such as clicking and/or pushing buttons) (Kennedy 2018: 72). The first game for the Famicom, the *Mobile Suit Z Gundam: Hot Scramble* was more ambitious. Bandai invited Masanobu Endo, the main game designer credited for his directorial works on *Xevious,* the innovative shooting games with in-depth narrative, to be a main game designer. Although this was still considered a simple adaptation of repayable events within the narrative of *Z Gundam*, it did serve the purpose of letting fans experience the inside of the cockpit of *Z Gundam*. Thus, *Mobile Suit Z Gundam: Hot Scramble* sold approximately 570,000 units (Nikkei, 2007), which led Bandai to include the *Gundam* series as one of their important portfolios for producing more games. *Mobile Suit Z Gundam: Hot Scramble* is still ranked in 9th place in the Top 10 list of the most selling *Gundam* video games of all time.

Console	Total	Total (%)	SD	SD(%)	Reg	Reg(%)
Family Computer	11	9.2%	10	90.9%	1	9.1%
Super Famicom	20	16.8%	14	70.0%	6	30.0%
Virtua Boy	1	0.8%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%
SEGA Saturn	8	6.7%	1	12.5%	7	87.5%
PlayStation	19	16.0%	7	36.8%	12	63.2%
Dream Cast	4	3.4%	0	0.0%	4	100.0%
PlayStation2	25	21.0%	5	20.0%	20	80.0%
Game Cube	3	2.5%	1	33.3%	2	66.7%
Xbox 360	4	3.4%	0	0.0%	4	100.0%
PlayStation3	12	10.1%	0	0.0%	12	100.0%
Wii	6	5.0%	4	66.7%	2	33.3%
PlayStation4	5	4.2%	2	40.0%	3	60.0%
Switch	1	0.8%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%
Console Total	119	100.0%	46	38.7%	73	61.3%
Mobile	Total	Total (%)	SD	SD(%)	Reg	Reg(%)
Game Boy	5	8.2%	5	100.0%	0	0.0%
Wonder Swan	13	21.3%	8	61.5%	5	38.5%
Game Boy Advance	5	8.2%	2	40.0%	3	60.0%
Game Gear	1	1.6%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%
PlayStation Portable	20	32.8%	3	15.0%	17	85.0%
Nintendo DS	7	11.5%	3	42.9%	4	57.1%
Nintendo 3DS	3	4.9%	1	33.3%	2	66.7%
PlayStation Vita	7	11.5%	1	14.3%	6	85.7%
Mobile Total	61	100.0%	24	39.3%	37	60.7%
Overall Total	180	100.0%	70	38.9%	110	61.1%

Table 2 Numbers based on Platform Distribution

Genre	Number (Total)	%	Number (SD)	% (SD)	Number (Reg)	%
Simulation	62	38.3%	44	71.0%	18	29.0%
RPG	11	6.8%	9	81.8%	2	18.2%
Simulation RPG	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	1	100.0%
Action	66	40.7%	11	16.7%	55	83.3%
Adventure	4	2.5%	0	-	4	100.0%
Card	1	0.6%	0	-	1	100.0%
Shooting	11	6.8%	1	9.1%	10	90.9%
Puzzle	2	1.2%	2	100.0%	0	-
Quizz	1	0.6%	0	-	1	100.0%
Table game	3	1.9%	2	-	1	33.3%
Total Number	162	100.0%	69	42.6%	93	57.4%
Mulitple Platform Redudants	18	N/A	4		14	N/A
Total Product Number	180		73		107	

Table 3 Numbers based on standard genre, based on Famitsu (note that overall distribution is the ratio of each genre over all of the titles, while the percentage for each genre represents how distribution is split between SD Gundam series and the rest)

Ludo Mix and divergent games in the *Gundam* Franchise

To understand the position of divergent games within the *Gundam* franchise, we decided to turn to the *SD Gundam* games, as *SD Gundam* products allow the production team to divert their strategy from taking purely convergent approaches. Table 1 shows the ratio of the *SD Gundam* titles compared to other *Gundam*-related games. Overall, the *SD Gundam* series consists of 42.6% or 69 titles, among which, 90.9% of the titles for the Famicom and 70% of the titles for Super Famicom are the *SD Gundam* series respectively, as shown in Table 2. The game titles for handheld games also demonstrate a similar tendency: all of the titles released for Game Boy are the *SD Gundam* series, while 61.5% accounted for the games developed for the WonderSwan handheld game device with 16-bit CPU.

From a genre perspective, the series introduced turn-based war simulation games to console game platforms. There were several war simulation titles that preceded them, but with the use of characters from the *Gundam* universe and the fact that the game was designed for young and novice players, the game lowered the bar of access to this emerging genre, which by then was mostly played by computer enthusiasts. Thus, the series popularized the war simulation genre for a younger audience. This situation reflects the overall ratio on the distribution of the genre between *SD Gundam* and the rest of the series, as shown in Table 3. War simulations occupy 71% of the *SD Gundam*, implying that simulation games are the dominant genre for the *SD Gundam* series. Another genre that *SD Gundam* explored for the *Gundam* franchise is the role-playing game (henceforth, RPG): 9 out of 11 games that are categorized as RPG in the *Gundam* franchise are part of the *SD Gundam* series. This genre choice is not coincidental, as it is stated in the 30th Anniversary memorial book of the *SD Gundam* published by Sunrise as follows:

> In this era of television, where screens have a resolution of 640×480, characters with smaller proportions are also suitable for reproduction in games, and thus, SD Gundam is heavily used as a subject for games. It was clear from previous titles that it was an easy one. It also blended in with RPGs, which were a persistently popular genre of game software for home consoles at this time. Due to the success of the first game, the highly popular "SD Gundam Gaiden" was released in that year for family computers, and a new one has been announced for the Super Nintendo, respectively. The game software was also actively promoted through commercial images and magazine advertisements, resulting in the release of SD Gundam. It also served as a tool for communicating to the public the existence of the SD Gundam series (Sunrise, 2019, 37).

This divergent strategy led to the expansion of the entire *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise as exemplified in the *Samurai Warrior Gundam* and *Knight Gundam*, among others, which developed their own story lines, further attracting a young audience in the process. In total, 70 *SD Gundam* titles and three additional

deformed character titles have been released, with the latest titles being released in November 2019. 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 "by creating a parallel but related world and also stirs interest in the older instantiations of the franchise" (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019). Action games began to be released after the 32-bit/64-bit era when console video game platforms were equipped with interactive 3D graphic processing capabilities, and thus, the mechanic design could be more faithfully recreated in the digital realm. The convergent approach was more often adopted from then on. This will be discussed in the next section.

Ludo Mix and convergent games in the *Gundam* Franchise

As shown in Table 1, for non-SD *Gundam* series, divergent approaches are still prevalent, as they amount to 57.29%. Convergent approaches, on the other hand, cover 11.46%, and hybrid 31.25%. Combined with SD *Gundam*, the percentages of divergent type games has grown to 74.7%, hybrid 18.5%, and convergent only 6.8%.

That does not mean, however, that developers did not challenge the convergent approach. The convergent approach to the *Gundam* games started with *Mobile Suit Gundam: F91 Formula Wars 0122*, released for Super Famicom in 1991. But a majority of games that implemented the convergence approach were made for console platforms with 3D graphic processing capabilities. Table 5[8] shows the sales ranking of *Gundam* video games using convergent approaches. As exhibited in the previous study by Nakamura and Tosca (2019), even the best-selling titles did not reach sales of 400,000 units, which implies that these titles are meant for core

8. Numbers based on Nikkei Entertainment (2007, 107) All of the 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 570,000 units, leaving the ranking unchanged.

fans of the franchise. The ranking also reflects what these core fans want from the gaming experience. All of the platforms for which games were developed were consoles with 3D graphic processing capabilities. Nine titles were action-focused, among which, five titles are 3D actions with a third-person view. As for *Mobile Suit Gundam : The Blue Destiny* trilogy, and *Gundam Side Story 0079: Rise from the Ashes*, these were first-person shooting games where players had a fixed first-person view from within the cockpit of the mobile suite. Only two games are identified as a simulation game. *Mobile Suit Gundam: F91 Formula Wars 0122* was set in UC 0122, one year prior to the timeline in which the anime film, *Mobile Suit Gundam F91* takes places. The story in the game provides the basic premise of political, technological and social landscape of its time, with some of the characters overlapping the game and the film. Thus, the game extends the UC universe in both timeline and spatial details of the world. The armed conflict depicted in the game was later canonized with the conflicts being officially named as "Second Old Mobile Campaign.[9]" *Mobile Suit Gundam: Zoenic Front*, which is ranked in 3rd place, was intended to allow players to experience One Year War from the perspective of the Principles of Zeon. All of the aforementioned titles provide the details of the Universal Century universe.

9. It is listed on the official timeline of Formula Plan in the magazine *Gundam Mobile Suit Bible: Gundam F91* vol24 (2019/ In Japanese): p.32.

	Title	Platform	Genre	Graphic	Date	Sales
1	Mobile Suit Gundam Lost War Chronicle	PS2	Action	3D	2002/08/01	382,670
2	Mobile Suit Gundam Battle Field Record U.C. 0081	PS3	Action	3D	2009/09/03	259,245
3	Mobile Suit Gundam: Zeonic Front	PS2	Simulation	3D	2001/09/06	239,055
4	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 1	SS	Shooting	3D	1996/09/20	206,937
5	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 2	SS	Shooting	3D	1996/12/06	187,569
6	Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	PS3	Action	3D	2006/11/11	146199
7	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 3	SS	Shooting	3D	1997/03/07	134,878
8	Gundam Side Story 0079: Rise from the Ashes	DC	Shooting	3D	1999/08/26	118,813
9	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Stories	PS3	Action	3D	2014/05/29	110239
10	Mobile Ops: The One Year War	XB360	Action	3D	2008/06/26	38713
11	Mobile Suit Gundam F91: Formula Wars 0122	SFC	Simulation	2D	1991/07/06	N/A

Table 4: Estimated sales volume of the Gundam video games using convergent approaches.[footnote]Numbers are based on Gz Brain Database <https://www.f-ism.net/> All of the numbers are estimated.[/footnote] Based on F-ism.net
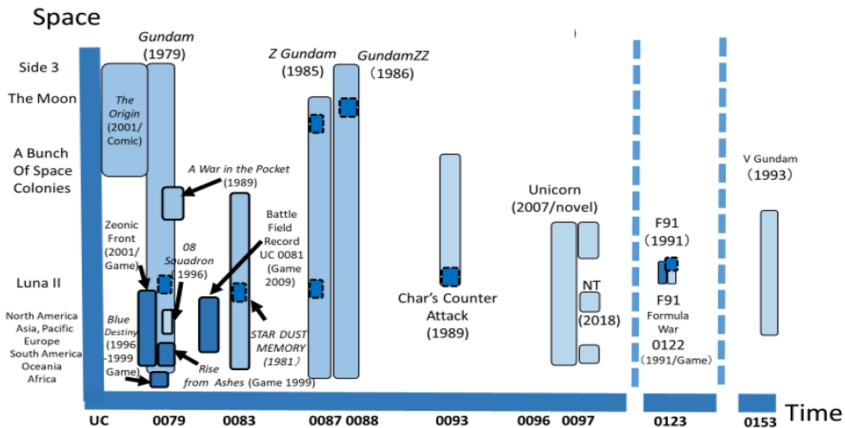

Figure 4: The expansion of the Universal Century World with convergence-type games (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019)

Furthermore, each title has manga and/or novel adaptation, which follow the main plot first introduced in these games[10]. Some titles with original mobile suites, such as *The Blue Destiny* trilogy and

10. eBook Japan (2017) Gundam Series Timeline The Universal Century Version (In Japanese) <https://ebookjapan.yahoo.co.jp/content/etc/gundam/nenpyo/>

Rise from the Ashes, even had plastic models released, further enriching the fan experience.

In Figure 4, the additional realm explored by convergent games is shown in a darker color. These additions seem to be canonically insignificant, as new additions are not the main plot of the various incidents taking place in the UC universe, but this is where the game design of these games plays a significant role. The numerous battle fields, which were designed for these games, and filled with meticulous details and intense combat experiences, allow the players to get absorbed in an in-depth experience from a protagonist perspective.

<p style="text-align:center">Hybrid type opens up for a wider player demographic</p>

In this section, the hybrid type is analyzed. As shown in Table 1, 30 titles, or 18.5%, are considered to be hybrid in our classification. For the present analysis, among these 30 titles, five titles fall into the category of games whose primary mode is adaptation. Still, they have additional content that contributes to the extension of the Universal Century universe. *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *Mobile Suit Gundam Encounter in Space*, for example, follow the main plot of the first *Gundam*. But the players get to play a completely different role upon completing the story mode of the game. A war simulation game developed for Super Famicom, *Mobile Suit Gundam Cross Dimension*, has a side-story scenario upon completing the main scenario that follows the anime's storyline. *Mobile Suit Z Gundam and Mobile Suit Gundam Char's Counterattack* enables players to play from different characters' perspectives. Apart from this, two of the major series fall into hybrid categories. One is the earlier phase of the *Versus* series. This series is one of the main examples within the Gundam games that takes full advantage of the vast fictional world as a playing field. The series started with the launch of the arcade game, *Mobile Suit Gundam Federation VS. Zeon* (hence called *Versus* series), which was later expanded and ported to console game platforms during the PS2 era. This third-person perspective, the 3D fighting

game, was developed as a result of a collaboration with Capcom, the game development studio known for high-quality 3D action games, including 3D fighting games. Thus, the involvement of Capcom ensured the quality of game mechanics, both for single and multiple players modes. While many missions explore the main events and setting of the anime, other missions explore areas which were   never introduced before, thus expanding the story world. In this way, the series allowed long-time fans to get immersed in the *Gundam* world, and simultaneously enabled newcomers to have a great gaming experience without knowing much about the series. The second long-lasting series is *Mobile Suit Gundam Gihren's Greed* series, one of the most popular war simulation games in the franchise. This series covers major armed conflicts in the Universal Century universe, including extensive anime footage of the 'historical record' of the Universal Century, from the 1st anime to the incidents taking place in the *Mobile Suit Gundam: Hathaway's Flash.* It covers all of the main plot of the anime, but the game is known for its vast amount of information and graphic data on mobile suites , weaponry and characters, as well as numerous 'what if' scenarios for those players who are interested in finding alternative storylines. This series covers a wide customer base, as it could attract both *Gundam* fans and war simulation enthusiasts. On a parallel strategy, the *Gundam battle* series focuses on mobile suit fighting, not only for the main scenario in the anime series, but also incorporating side stories created for video games, novels and other transmedial products implemented throughout the series. In other words, hybrid games seemed to be designed to entice both gamers and core fans of the franchise, meeting the needs of very diverse target groups.

General considerations about the sales ranking of video games

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

Table 5: Top 10 sales ranking of the Gundam video games in Japan

Finally, the sales tendency of the Gundam video game portfolio and ludo mix is discussed in this section. In relating to previous sections, the sales ranking affirms the effectiveness of the initial strategy adopted by Bandai Namco (at the time, Bandai, as they didn´t complete their merger with Namco until 2005) to concentrate on developing turn-based simulation games within the *SD Gundam* series. The series occupies six slots among the top ten best-selling *Gundam* games: five of which were simulation games and the other role-playing games, which can be considered as a great achievement in itself, since there were only four titles developed for this genre. The super-deformed mechanic design was suitable for non-action game genres, and was thus embraced by fans at the time. This style (developing war simulation games with super-deformed characters from Science Fiction anime) was eventually adopted for the *Super Robot Wars* videogames series, in which *SD Gundam* characters were also featured along with other robotic characters from the *Super Giant Robot* series, expanding this model to the creation of an entirely new series.

Apart from the simulation genre, four titles belong to the action genre, in which players assume the role of a pilot and control various kinds of mobile suites. Among four games, three titles were released for the PlayStation2, the bestselling video game

console platform to date with a global circulation of 150 million[11] and known for its highly advanced 3D graphic processing capabilities at the time of release. All of the three titles are of hybrid type, as they allow players to both go through the main plot of the anime series and also try a variety of missions that show unexplored areas of the Universal Century universe. Two of these titles are part of the *Versus* series. As far as action games are concerned, the *Versus* series is one of the most long-lasting series, as the latest instantiation was released on July 30th 2020. With 183 playable mobile suites stretching over 36 works at this latest incarnation of the series[12]. However, the series has eventually transformed into representing the most extreme case of divergence type of experience within the franchise. A similar path was taken by *Dynasty Warriors: Gundam* series. The games attempted to integrate various types of *Gundam* from different *Gundam* universes to entice action game fans with hack and slash fighting mechanics, using both melee and long-range attacks. Just as in the later Versus series, having various lineups from multiple universes bring the maximum number of players from the *Gundam* franchise fanbase.

11. Kyodo News (2019) "Sony's PlayStation recognized as world's best-selling game console" *Japan Times* <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/12/04/business/corporate-business/sony-playstation-world-best-selling-game-console/#.Xu-g7WgzbHo.>

12. Based on the information provided in the official home page Mobile Suit Gundam Versus series portal <https://gundam-vs.jp/extreme/index.html> (In Japanese)
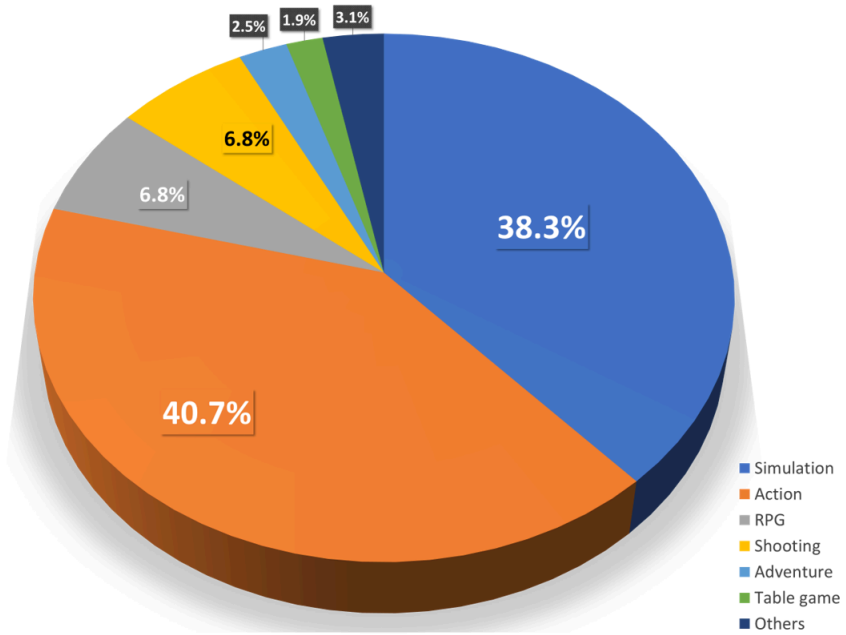
Figure 5: Overall distribution of Game Genre for the Gundam Franchise
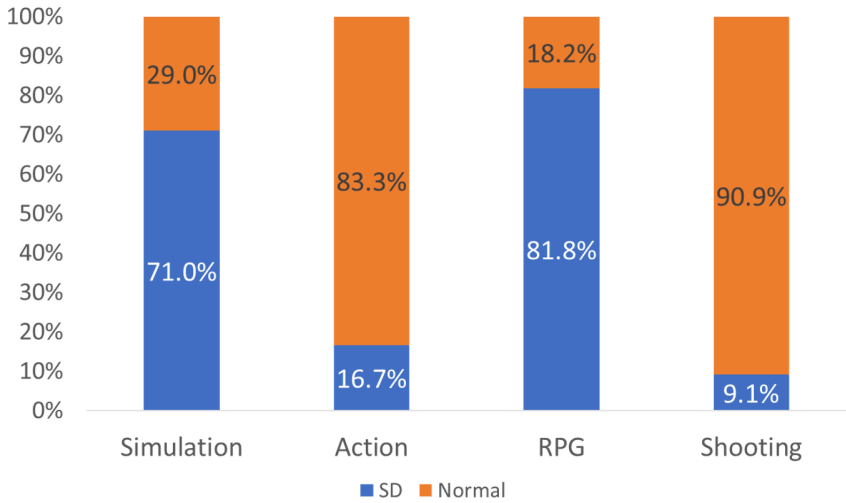

Figure 6: Genre distribution of SD Gundam games and regular Gundam games

CONCLUSIONS: A BALANCED LUDO MIX FOR THE
MEDIA FRANCHISE

Our analysis has revealed some interesting characteristics of the
overall distribution of game genres among the *Mobile Suit
Gundam* games released for video game consoles and handheld
platforms from 1986 to 2019 in Japan, which is shown in the pie
chart on Figure 5. In the cases where video game platforms, either
console or mobile, are not equipped with 3D graphic processing
capabilities, the characters in *SD Gundam* are the chosen means
of expression. The genre was carefully geared to optimize the
given specifications of the platform, as shown in Figure 6. While
the design of Super Deformed is not appropriate for heavy action
sequences, it is a good fit for such game genres as turn-based
war simulation and role-playing games; both of which do not
require dynamic movement of the in-game characters. However,
the design of Super Deformed is suitable for providing an in-
depth narrative experience (RPG), and for showing intricate world
settings and multiple situated possibilities (simulation). For the
simulation genre, using characters such as those from *SD Gundam,*
which are already familiar to the target audience of young male
players, the games naturally become a suitable entry point for this
genre. For games that use regular *Gundam* mobile suites and other
characters in realistic settings, the series gained more popularity
when the game platforms were upgraded with 3D graphics
processing capabilities. This is particularly important for games of
the convergent type, as they intend to allow the players to enter
previously unexplored regions in the Universal Century universe.
Since their players tend to be core fans of the *Gundam* franchise,
both the narrative and world experience need to be coherent with
the existing narrative within the universe. Therefore, actions and
shooting games are designed to meet this purpose. These gaming
experiences are often later complemented with manga and/or novel
adaptations to enrich the consumer experience in the tradition of
media mix practices common in Japan. In these developments,
games are the driving force of the expansive movement of the
franchise. Games of the hybrid type, on the other hand, focus on

trying to cover a wider player base. Thus, for actions, whether it's the 3D fighting or 3D hack and slash type, a variety of scenarios from the main storyline to side storylines are developed to enrich the player experience. From a business perspective, Bandai Namco´s decision to form partnerships with Capcom and Koei Tecmo, as leading game studios in their respective fields, is a rational and sound decision. For simulation games like the *Gihren's Greed* series, a vast amount of 'what if' scenarios, coupled with newly-created anime footage, allow players to immerse themselves in the gaming environment. In other words, a diverse mix of ludic elements or ludo mix meets the needs of both newcomers and core fans of the franchise; a phenomenon also observed in relation to the overall strategy of the *Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise* (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019). Returning to the ecological metaphor present in the ludo mix definition, we could say that the core components of the franchise (its DNA or *worldness*) are able to mutate into different species. Some will successfully adapt to their habitat, and others risk failing. For instance, a game like *Dynasty Warriors: Gundam* acts as a Trojan horse that can recruit action game enthusiasts to the franchise, presumably spinning other acts of consumption. The present findings reaffirm that the game portfolio is, in fact, the larger part of the overall *Gundam* media franchise, demonstrating a high flexibility in different "evolutions" and changes of environment.

Future research needs to be conducted to explore the usefulness of this ecological metaphor in a theoretically founded and more systematic way, as well as to determine the extent to which the overall business concept may or may not be influenced by the ludo mix. In this respect, a complementary micro-analysis level could help. This could either engage the content/aesthetic level or even the reception level, which would open the way for a more mixed-methods approach than the one we have chosen here. One could, for instance, conduct close readings of each of the three types of extensions, namely, divergent, convergent and hybrid, in order to elucidate how the ludo mix is structured in each type of game, in relation to the micro level, that is, within a single

gaming experience. Another avenue of inquiry could be to further scrutinize the hybrid game category that we have worked with in this paper. One way to do this could be to examine the nature of the gaming experience when the games engage both the main plot and another (extra) story for the game titles that were sold as "adaptations" of the original animation versions. This would mean incorporating a reception perspective into the analysis, engaging players by, for example, interviewing them or studying player documentation such as discussions in player fora, etc., hoping that further examination can clarify how hybrid games can be positioned within the divergent and convergent dichotomy. Further clarifying and conceptually strengthening these three categories will no doubt benefit scholarship preoccupied with mapping the life and evolution of entire media franchises. As for *Gundam* in particular, a further study avenue could be to incorporate those games that are excluded from the present study, such as PC game software, online games, mobile game services, game apps, or virtual reality experience and their roles played in ludo mix, in order to fully map the franchise.

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