

USE OF DATABASE NARRATIVE IN MULTIMEDIA IPS AND VISUAL NOVELS

USO DE NARRATIVAS DE BANCO DE DADOS EM IPS APLICADA A VISUAL NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the theoretical concepts and practical effects of the process of creating multimedia Intellectual Property (IP), as a franchise solidified in the market, through the use of database narrative in the creation of a game genre called visual novel. Through an exploratory study on concepts such as otaku subculture, database narrative, visual novel, and multimedia IPs, using the narrative review method, two case studies were structured. The results demonstrated that the capacity of visual novels to generate new successful multimedia IPs requires relatively small investments compared to other media in this cultural field, both in specific niches and throughout the otaku subculture in general, and even surpassing this subculture, with successful Western visual novels already circulating in the market, feeding back into this highly engaged subculture. This confirmed the hypothesis that the use of visual novels in the construction of a multimedia IP is a strategy successfully adopted since the 1990s, allowing cultural product companies to ensure, with little investment, a constant generation of original or adapted content, just as the creation of content by fan communities after the release of a title. Therefore, it can be concluded that this strategy is ideal for experimenting with narrative elements and for launching products on the market with low cost and high reach among the public.

Keywords: Visual novel. Database narrative. Fan culture. Transmedia.

RESUMO

O presente artigo tem como objetivo apresentar os conceitos teóricos e os efeitos práticos do processo de criação de Intellectual Property (IP) multimídia, como uma franquia solidificada no mercado, através do uso da narrativa de banco de dados na confecção de um gênero de games denominado visual novel. Através de um estudo exploratório sobre conceitos como subcultura otaku, narrativa por banco de dados, visual novel e IPs multimídia, por meio do método de revisão narrativa, estruturou-se a realização de dois estudos de caso. Os resultados demonstraram que a capacidade da visual novel na geração de novas IPs multimídia de sucesso requer poucos investimentos de pouco montante em relação à outras mídias deste campo cultural, tanto em nichos específicos quanto em toda a subcultura otaku em geral, e até mesmo ultrapassando esta subcultura, com visual novels ocidentais de sucesso já em circulação no mercado, retroalimentando esta mesma subcultura altamente engajada. Com isto, confirmou-se a hipótese de que o uso de visual novels na construção de uma IP multimídia é uma estratégia adotada com sucesso desde os anos 1990, permitindo às companhias de produtos culturais assegurar com pouco investimento uma constante geração de conteúdos originais ou adaptados, tal como o engendramento de conteúdos feita pelas comunidades de fã posteriormente ao lançamento de um título. Desta forma, conclui-se que a estratégia é ideal para experimentações de elementos narrativos e de lançamentos no mercado com baixo custo e alta capilaridade junto ao público.

Palavras-chave: Visual novel. Narrativa por banco de dados. Cultura de fã. Transmídia.



1 INTRODUCTION

The global diffusion of Japanese pop culture from the 1990s onward fostered the emergence of broad Western fan communities dedicated to consuming Japanese cultural products, such as J-Pop, J-Games, J-Dramas, anime, J-Movies, manga, and VTubers (Condry, 2013; Galbraith, 2019; Diniz et al., 2022; Galbraith, 2022; Regis; Ferreira, 2025). Among the various segments of this industry, the visual novel genre stands out as one of the most popular forms of electronic games in Japan (Alves; Taborda, 2015; Koyama; Kobayashi-Hichibe; Nakamura, 2019; Diniz; Regis; Ferreira, 2023), which gradually won over Western audiences.

Visual novels are distinguished by their hybrid nature between interactive literature and electronic games. With simple and accessible mechanics, they focus on narrative, offering the player a first-person experience that prioritizes emotional immersion and the construction of alternative routes. The plot unfolds through texts, dialogues, soundtracks, and visual resources, allowing each decision to lead to multiple endings (Camingue; Carstensdottir; Melcer, 2021; Pratama; Wardani; Akbar, 2018). Some works feature complex narrative structures, requiring guides or diagrams to reach all possible endings (Alves; Taborda, 2015). This narrative multiplicity ensures the player a creative and engaging experience (Cavallaro, 2009). In the West, initial access to the genre occurred independently, through fansubs—translations made by fans—which enabled its global dissemination (Alves; Taborda, 2015; Diniz; Regis; Ferreira, 2023). A visual example of gameplay from a visual novel can be seen in Figure 1, which presents response options that change the story's outcome.



Figure 1 - Visual novel *Katawa Shoujo* (2012)



Source: *Katawa Shoujo* (2012)

The visual novel genre intertwines with the concept of “database consumption” formulated by Azuma (2009) to describe the contemporary logic of cultural production in Japan. This logic was widely absorbed by otaku subculture, characterized by the intense engagement of fans with niche cultural products such as anime and electronic games (Barral, 1999; Azuma, 2009; Regis et al., 2024). In visual novels, this narrative model found fertile ground, combining low production costs with a high capacity to generate affective bonds between audiences and characters (Camingue; Carstensdottir; Melcer, 2021). The social, romantic, and parasocial interactions constructed within these narrative environments consolidated networks of affect that drove engagement and fed back into the consumption of new stories.

Based on these premises, this article proposes to analyze visual novels and the technologies that sustain them as platforms that propel derivative cultural products, gathered into transmedia conglomerates of digital intellectual properties (multimedia IPs, or simply IPs) (Blind; Thumm, 2007).



In this way, such intellectual properties (IPs) can be developed in an economically efficient manner and with reduced implementation risks (Koyama; Kobayashi-Hichibe; Nakamura, 2019). By combining low cost with strong emotional bonds with the audience, visual novels constitute a strategic space for narrative experimentation that anticipates more complex projects—such as animations, games, series, and films—which require greater investments and present higher commercial risks (Cavallaro, 2009; Koyama; Kobayashi-Hichibe; Nakamura, 2019).

Thus, we advocate for the use of visual novels as low-cost narrative prototypes capable of testing the receptivity of characters, plots, and fictional universes, using the audience's emotional engagement as an indicator of success (Cavallaro, 2009; Pratama; Wardani; Akbar, 2018).

2 METHODOLOGY

In accordance with the objectives outlined in the introduction, this article is grounded in an exploratory study that investigates the concepts of otaku culture, database consumption, visual novels, and multimedia IPs. The methodological approach adopted combines the narrative review method (Onwuegbuzie; Frels, 2016) with the analysis of two case studies, aiming to understand how visual novels function as a formative nucleus and/or driver of transmedia intellectual properties.

The narrative review aims to describe and synthesize existing knowledge on a topic, offering an overview of the field by mapping the nature and scope of research in a broad sense. This procedure allows for contextualizing the main theories, concepts, categories, trends, and gaps in the current state of the art in emerging or underexplored areas, without the need to apply the rigid research protocols required by systematic reviews (Onwuegbuzie; Frels, 2016). The narrative review was guided by consulting academic sources available on Google Scholar and Japan's Scholarly and Academic Information Navigator (CiNii), complemented by the authors' prior experience with the subject matter. This strategy sought to ensure breadth and rigor in the bibliographic investigation, especially considering that a significant portion of scientific and technical production on the topic is found in repositories from Asian countries.

Subsequently, two case studies were conducted to deepen the analysis and identify emerging trends in the production and consumption of digital cultural artifacts. The adoption of this approach stems from the need to examine the phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective that simultaneously considers the technological, narrative, and market dimensions of visual novels as catalysts of transmedia products.



The first case study addresses the visual novel based on the anime *Evangelion*, conceived in the 1990s and recognized by authors such as Azuma (2009) and Galbraith (2019; 2022) as one of the inaugural IPs of the narrative model that drives the creation of derivative products across multiple media. Its relevance also lies in the longevity and adaptability demonstrated over decades in a market characterized by the rapid obsolescence of cultural works. The second case study analyzes the visual novel franchise *Fate*, released in 2004, widely considered the most emblematic example of commercial success and consolidation of a transmedia franchise originating from this format (Cavallaro, 2009; Britt; Britt, 2021; Bruno, 2021). The selection of these cases allows for the observation of the evolution of the narrative integration model and its contribution to the constitution of robust multimedia IPs, sustained both by the affective engagement of fans and by narrative and technological innovation.

3 DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS OF VISUAL NOVELS

3.1 OTAKU CULTURE

Otaku culture (お宅 or オタク) is a broad concept that originally emerged in the 1970s to refer to devoted fans of pop culture items such as anime, games, computers, films, among others (Azuma, 2009). According to Azuma (2009) and Barral (2000), in Japan, its original meaning remains associated with a desire for isolation in private spaces, preferring the company of fictional characters. Such behavior carries a negative connotation in Japanese society, contrasting with the ideal image of the salaryman: a hardworking, productive, sociable man and head of household (Condry, 2013). With the rise of this consumerist culture, companies and industries began directing products and services toward this audience, which maintains its own forms of social collaboration (Condry, 2013; Galbraith, 2019). Gradually, the negative connotation diminished, becoming incorporated into Japan's national branding through policies such as Cool Japan, while the animation industry diversifies into foreign markets (Galbraith, 2019; Regis; Ferreira, 2025). In the West, especially in Brazil, the term otaku has a positive connotation, functioning as a self-designation for fans of Japanese pop culture (Diniz et al., 2022; Regis; Ferreira, 2025). Azuma (2009) emphasizes that otaku distinguish fiction from reality but prefer fiction, forming alternative social patterns. To fully understand the concept of otaku, it is essential to consider the terms *Moe* (萌え) and *Kawaii* (可愛い).

Moe (萌え), derived from *moeru* (to sprout, to blossom). In the industry's current usage, it denotes an instantaneous consumerist feeling of affection, protection, and/or appreciation toward fictional



characters that can foster parasocial relationships (Galbraith, 2019); this attachment may arise from cute and vulnerable figures as well as from strong, protective characters, depending on the consumer's inner dispositions (Saitō, 2011). *Kawaii* (可愛い) primarily means "cute" and evokes traits such as sweetness and gentleness; it is often deployed as an aesthetic to intensify *moe* and generate passionate engagement (Azuma, 2009; Galbraith, 2019; Diniz et al., 2022; Diniz; Regis; Ferreira, 2023; Regis et al., 2024), while still allowing characters to subvert gender expectations by taking on leadership or protagonist roles in war and adventure settings (Azuma, 2009; Saitō, 2011). Examples are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Moe characters, from left to right: Asuka Langley, from *Evangelion*; Saber, from *Fate*; Anya Forger, from *Spy Family*; and Chika Fujiwara, from *Kaguya Sama: Love is War*



Source: Crunchyroll

The digital era intensified the active participation of audiences in creating derivative content, blurring the boundaries between producers and consumers, spectators and participants (Jenkins, 2009). Thus, fandom transformed into a participatory culture, creating complex parallel artifacts such as fan art, animations, and music, often achieving quality comparable to official works (Condry, 2013; Britt; Britt, 2021; Bruno, 2021). Composed of official and unofficial products, this market became a relevant sector in Japan's creative economy, encompassing toys, fashion, publishing, and DVDs (Condry, 2013; Galbraith, 2019). Within this context, visual novels emerged, originating in the 1990s when professionals from the anime industry migrated to games, enjoying the simplicity of development and the popularization of fan works (Cavallaro, 2009; Azuma, 2009).

The relationship between anime and visual novels persists to this day, with mutual adaptations and constant dialogue between the two media. Thus, visual novels become inseparable from otaku



aesthetics and culture, especially considering that many game developers began their careers as manga and anime artists (Cavallaro, 2009). This collaborative energy reflects the productive mode focused on freely interpretable characters, which become central transmedia objects (Condry, 2013; Steinberg, 2012).

3.2 DATABASE CONSUMPTION AND TRANSMEDIA POTENTIAL: THE CENTRALITY OF THE CHARACTER

The intense engagement of otaku fans is intrinsically linked to forms of consumption that fragment and reorder narratives. According to Azuma (2009), Steinberg (2012), and Regis et al. (2024), this audience does not restrict itself to official works: it appropriates derivative content, extracts specific elements, and creates new readings from a system of references that transcends the centralized “grand narrative.” Thus, cultural value is not concentrated solely in the linear plot but in the circulation of recombinable components that allow for continuous derivations, both industrial and fan-produced.

From the 1990s onward, Japanese cultural production entered the postmodern paradigm and consolidated the database narrative model (Azuma, 2009), particularly visible in otaku subculture. In this regime, linear coherence loses centrality and gives way to a repository of elements—character traits, archetypes, social relationships, visual styles, dramatic situations, and plot patterns—that can be combined to generate new stories according to audience demand. Rather than the narrative organizing the characters, the process tends to invert: the character, as a unit of appeal and recognition, comes to guide narrative construction and anchor the consumer’s experience. For this reason, the work can operate simultaneously as product and simulacrum, in the sense that its “novelty” derives, to a large extent, from the reconfiguration of items previously available in the cultural repertoire (Azuma, 2009; Bruno, 2021).

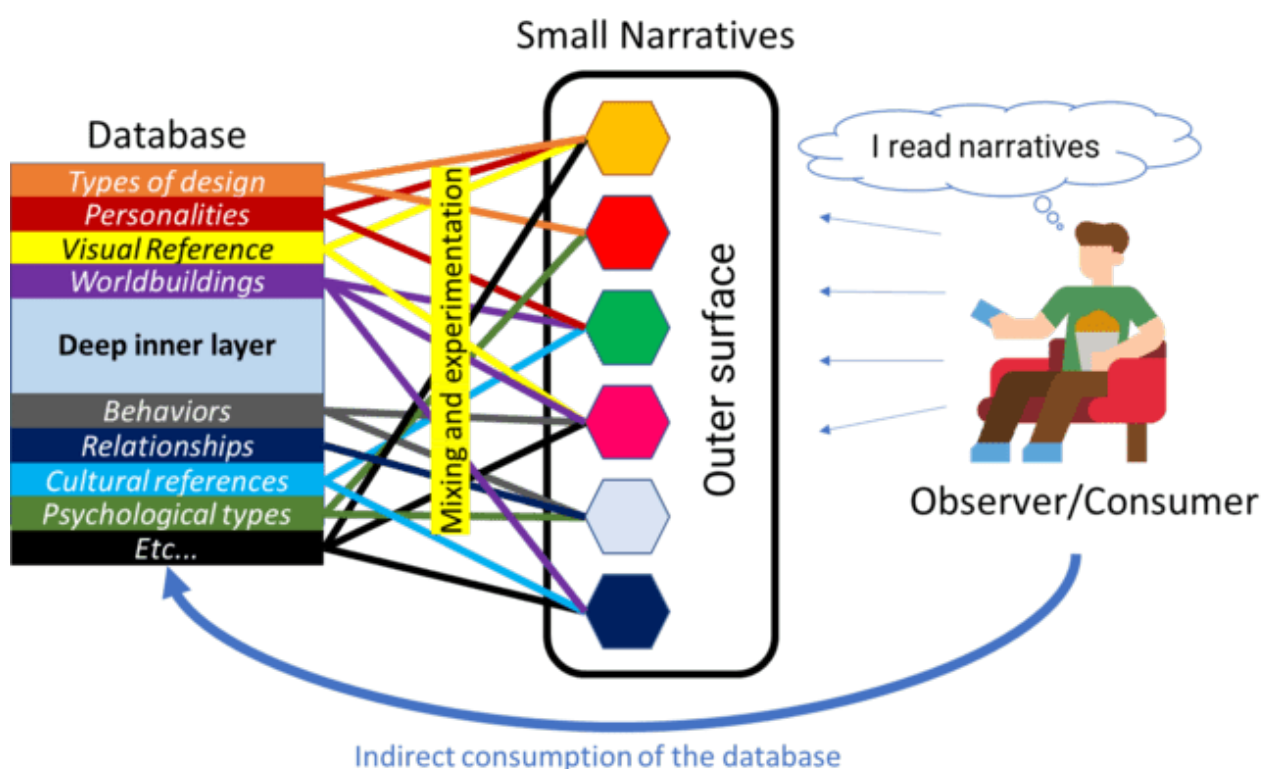
In this context, the character becomes the strategic axis of creation and consumption. It functions as a nucleus of affective identification and as an operator of transmedia communication—that is, a relatively stable element that can be replicated, adapted, and reenacted across different media and products (Steinberg, 2012; Condry, 2013). By recognizing this centrality, the Japanese cultural industry developed design and emotional appeal construction techniques that maximize audience adhesion—with emphasis on *moe* and *kawaii*—frequently mobilized to foster parasocial relationships and experiences of escapism (Azuma, 2009; Britt; Britt, 2021).

The database logic also helps explain why certain franchises expand easily into transmedia ecosystems and strategies associated with Media Mix. If the “grand narrative” tends to require continuity and causal progression, the database allows different products to operate as relatively autonomous



excerpts from the same repertoire: a game, a derivative manga, an anime, a collectible product, or an event can emphasize distinct aspects (a specific romantic pairing, a set of personality traits, a type of conflict, a striking visual) without depending on a single, totalizing chain to make sense to the fan (Steinberg, 2012). Consumption is thus organized around points of attraction—primarily characters and their relationships—and not merely by “what happens next” in the story (Figure 3). This encourages both serial industrial production and the participatory productivity of fans, who explore gaps, variations, and combinations that linear narrative cannot fully encompass (Azuma, 2009; Regis et al., 2024).

Figure 3 – Database consumption logic visualized.



Source: Made by the authors.

According to Condry (2013), in the construction of the character, one distinguishes *Kyarakutā* (its visual and symbolic aspect) from *Kyara* (its essence, personality, and patterns of action). This duality favors the replication and personalization of fictional figures, as it stabilizes “what is recognizable” while simultaneously making flexible “what can vary” in each medium or product. In this way, the character



comes to exist as a modular structure, constructed from categories that are stored and recombined according to cultural and market objectives (Azuma, 2009; Bruno, 2021).

In works such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, frequently cited as a landmark of Japanese postmodernism, one observes the rupture with linearity and the emphasis on affective relationships between characters and audience (Azuma, 2009; Kacsuk, 2021; Kopylova, 2021; Çalik Bedir, 2021), which will be examined more closely further on. The same rationality appears in visual novels, where routes, alternative endings, and rearrangements of bonds between characters function as formal devices that make explicit the combinatorial logic of the database: it is not simply a matter of multiplying stories, but of serially reorganizing recognizable elements that sustain engagement. Thus, the character does not merely inhabit the fictional universe but grounds it: it becomes the point of convergence between aesthetics, affect, and market, organizing consumption, guiding emotional investment, and sustaining the transmedia expansion of works (Azuma, 2009; Condry, 2013; Çalik Bedir, 2021; Diniz; Regis; Ferreira, 2023).

4 DEVELOPMENT AND CONCEPTION OF VISUAL NOVELS

In Japan, “visual novel” (ビジュアルノベル) refers to a type of interactive fiction video game that presents a multi-branching narrative and enables a symbiosis between the player’s creativity and the studio’s artistic vision (Cavallaro, 2009). These games are generally developed for computers and mobile phones by teams with a small number of people (sometimes even being merely a leisure activity). However, when a title achieves success in the consumer market, its creators increase the number of team members and form formalized development teams. Finally, it is noteworthy that the occurrence of transactional success induces the development and production of a series of adaptations and spin-offs for multiple media, such as manga or anime (Klug; Lebowitz, 2011; Kopylova, 2021; Çalik Bedir, 2021).

In these games, the plot is presented through blocks of text, generally written in first person from the protagonist’s perspective. However, to assist with immersion, background images based on the protagonist’s location are shown along with portraits (facial, half-body, or full-body) to represent any character in the scene. Thus, these portraits change to represent the same character with distinct facial expressions or body language (Klug; Lebowitz, 2011). At more striking moments in the narrative, more detailed images are drawn specifically to represent the scene in question with tighter framing and greater aesthetic refinement through Computer Graphics Imagery (CGI) (Cavallaro, 2009).



Considering the skills required to play fluently, these games demand a degree similar to reading a Choose Your Own Adventure book, where, occasionally, the player will be presented with choices that will influence the story's events, leading the protagonist to distinct destinies. The difference is that the number of alternatives and sequences in Choose Your Own Adventure books is limited due to their nature as physical artifacts, while visual novels possess the capacity to propose exponentially complex branching and lengths because they are a digital medium, in addition to enabling the player's decisions to influence the story long after they have occurred (Klug; Lebowitz, 2011). Because of this extremely branched narrative, the plot's outcome is defined by the player's decisions, significantly increasing the replayability aspect of the genre (Cavallaro, 2009; Çalik Bedir, 2021; Camingue; Carstensdottir; Melcer, 2021).

Due to their heavy focus on writing and reading, the visual novels tend to have specifically unique narrative qualities among video games. According to Cavallaro (2009), these elements are translated to the multiple media in which these games are adapted or receive spin-offs, centrally highlighting the depth of dialogues between multiple characters and protagonists, since due to the first-person perspective of the games and the simple visual elements of these works, much is left to the description of what the characters see and interpret of the universe around them, in addition to their thoughts and internal reflections, significantly expanding the development of the characters presented during the game and consequently any derivative media.

Thus, authors such as Cavallaro (2009), Koyama, Kobayashi-Hichibe, and Nakamura (2019), and Çalik Bedir (2021) indicate that visual novels serve as the gateway for many doujin creators (derivative fan content) into the games industry. Koyama, Kobayashi-Hichibe, and Nakamura (2019) add that the visual novel production environment generates a very favorable ecosystem for the emergence of new talents in various areas of entertainment industry development due to its reduced technical barriers, thus being, in many cases, the opportunity for entry into other markets in this industry, such as: literary, game developers, scriptwriters, illustrators, etc.

Despite the genre being very popular in Japan, until the late 2000s, the visual novels were rarely released in the West. According to Klug and Lebowitz (2011) and Alves and Taborda (2015), the reasons for this fact lay in issues ranging from the language barrier (which required translation of scripts and all game dialogues) to concerns about how titles would be received in the West, due to the adult content present in a significant portion of these games. It is also important to highlight at this point the obstacle that existed at the time: the development teams for these games consisted of few people with little or no formal technical training. However, from the 2010s onward, there has been growing consumption and popularization of visual novels in the West (Alves; Taborda, 2015), leading to the emergence of the term



OELVN (Original English Language Visual Novel), which encompasses original content made in English (Diniz; Regis; Ferreira, 2023), demonstrating strong internationalization that the genre has achieved. One of the most expressive OELVN successes is the American Doki Doki Literature Club, released in 2017, with a psychological horror story disguised in *kawaii* aesthetics.

Given the above, visual novels possess a great capacity to generate content, allowing for the creation of original stories as well as the reimagining of existing stories, opening space for testing new multimedia IPs (Intellectual Properties) at a considerably lower cost compared to other digital cultural artifacts—for example, the development cost in Japan of a high-quality visual novel, meaning with voice acting, original music, and graphic engine creation, is 22 million yen (160 thousand dollars) (Koyama; Kobayashi-Hichibe; Nakamura, 2019). Therefore, the focus of visual novel development is character construction, with the proper industrial techniques postulated by Azuma (2009) and Cavallaro (2010), for the strengthening and feedback of participatory fan culture (Jenkins, 2009), with a focus on the free interpretation of these characters (Azuma, 2009), demonstrating that there is a latent potential for value generation through IPs intrinsic to visual novels at a low cost.

5 VISUAL NOVELS AS A TRANSMEDIATIC PRODUCT

5.1 VISUAL NOVELS: DISSOCIATION BETWEEN SMALL NARRATIVES AND THE LARGE NON-NARRATIVE

From the second half of the 1990s onward, there was a migration of professionals from the anime industry to the games industry, resulting in the application of narrative techniques from the animation industry in game development (Cavallaro, 2009), which caused the enrichment of the multimedia environment for data reconstitution, enabling the production of what were called at the time visual novels (Azuma, 2009). That is, narrative possibilities through databases materialized with the birth of the medium. Thus, Azuma (2009) argues that visual novels are the dissociative encounter between small narratives and the grand non-narrative, the latter being a general representation of the database image where all characteristics are stored for consultation, in contrast to the grand narrative theory that existed until then. This dissociative encounter occurs due to the great capillarity of multiple stories, endings, and relationships. That is, the small narratives that visual novels individually have the capacity to implement, allowing the consumer in a single work to visualize the entire database on which it was based, even if each parallel story does not connect, thus resulting in the so-called grand non-narrative (Azuma, 2009). It is



important to note that each small narrative present in visual novels was obtained from the combination of key elements present in the database, thus each narrative being a simulacrum as well (Azuma, 2009), as observed in the production scheme based on elements selected from a database illustrated in the diagram in Figure 4.

Figure 4 –Process of using database logic in storytelling applied specifically to *visual novels*



Source: Made by the authors

The genre applies all the strategies present in otaku subculture and database narrative theory to generate engagement and emotional connections between the audience and the characters, placing them as central elements in the work. Thus, each route of small narratives (here considered as simulacra, since they are merely variants achievable through gameplay) will attempt to focus on the development of certain archetypes, characters, and different relationships, always using *kawaii*, *moe*, and other



characteristics and strategies to make them visually appealing and pleasant in personality so as to generate empathy, while taking advantage of experimentation with relationships between characters to help build emotional and even parasocial and romantic connections between the audience and them. This importance of characters is proven by Pratama, Wardani, and Akbar (2018), who demonstrated that the design and visual appeal of characters in visual novels is what most captures the audience's attention during gameplay, followed by the development of the character's story and the story itself, and finally, the game design. Additionally, it should be noted that it is always necessary for some character to remain on screen to keep players attentive.

Furthermore, visual novels typically do not have a defined ending, leaving it to the player to choose the outcome that most appeals to them, generating a desire to play again in order to consume all possible content that can be constructed. Examples of results from different decisions in the visual novel *Fate/stay night* (2004) can be observed in Figure 5: on the left, the result of investing in a route favorable to the relationship with the character Saber, and on the right, Saber's fate in a route where she is corrupted and turns against the protagonist.

Figure 5 – Two distinct endings for Saber in the visual novel *Fate/stay night* (2004)



Source: *Fate/stay night* (2004)

5.2 THE CAPACITY OF CHARACTERS BEING THE CENTRAL VECTOR IN A IP

Character production is an intrinsic part of transmedia narrative, where characters are often reimaged and reinterpreted by fans, which encourages the construction of games where various interconnected narratives reside so that their content can be transmitted through diverse transmedia flows (Jenkins, 2009). In this sense, besides being a creatively expropriated object, the character also becomes an object of accelerated capitalist commercial exploitation. This assertion holds true given that the complex industrial collaborative network surrounding anime media production objectively



and primarily seeks the transmedia commercialization of the characters in question, always striving to commercialize and license them to as many industries as possible (Steinberg, 2012; Condry, 2013; Yin, 2021; Galbraith, 2022).

Evidence from multiple sources indicates that character merchandising and licensing consistently outperforms revenue from anime distribution: as early as 2005, licensing characters across media and products already generated about ten times the income of anime distribution (Condry, 2013); focusing only on Japan's external market, METI data show that in 2014 character merchandising licensing (US\$900 million) exceeded animation licensing and distribution (US\$200 million) by 450% (METI, 2016); and in the domestic market in 2021, the AJA (Association of Japanese Animations) reports that the 100 best-selling characters in official merchandising earned ¥663.1 billion, while the combined revenue from streaming (¥154.3 billion), physical media (¥66.2 billion), cinema (¥60.2 billion), and television (¥90.6 billion) totaled ¥371.6 billion, meaning top-character merchandising alone was 78% higher than distribution revenues (AJA, 2023). This gap is likely underestimated, since AJA does not include overseas merchandising and considers only the top 100 characters, leaving a substantial long tail (Anderson, 2006) of monetizable characters and niche fandoms; fan-built databases such as MyAnimeList and AniDB list over 145,000 characters from more than 20,000 anime, with many titles sustaining large followings (e.g., *Shingeki no Kyojin* with over 3.4 million followers), reflecting both the market's breadth and the audience's drive to catalog and preserve character configurations as part of their contact with the "database" that generates the narratives they consume (Bruno, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2023). In summary, there still exists a long tail of marketable characters to be highlighted, serving the most diverse niches and sub-niches, where visual novels, which have reduced production costs, possess the ideal attributes for such development and public attendance.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that these data refer to officially licensed content. But, as postulated earlier, otaku culture is characterized by shaping social actors with an avid sense of producing parallel content (Azuma, 2009; Condry, 2013; Galbraith, 2019; Regis et al., 2024). Therefore, various games, toys, action figures, clothing, products, etc. made by individual fans and unofficial industries flood the market in order to satisfy this growing demand, driving a relevant market that has not yet been fully mapped and is never satisfied by the original production of the rights holders (Regis et al., 2024).

Condry (2013) reveals that this focus on characters and their respective transmedia capacity occurred in part due to the decrease and aging of the Japanese population and economic stagnation, which greatly affected the children's toy industry, which was one of the few types of derivative products from these animations until then. Therefore, these industries adapted and converted their products, stories, and characters for these new, older audiences, who had more complex social and entertainment



needs, accelerating the transmedia execution of works. That is, an industry that previously produced children's anime toys, throughout the 1990s began an alteration in its merchandise portfolio, starting to produce action figures, clothing, and collectible items, for example, since an adult has greater access to different items compared to a child, in addition to having a higher income to consume different items (Condry, 2013).

Finally, as highlighted by Yin (2021) and Regis et al. (2024), this audience does not possess total loyalty to these characters in their consumerist relationship, being able to easily and quickly identify with/fall in love with new characters, and thus consume their respective new narratives, constituting an individualistic and self-fulfilling relationship. Therefore, these industries sought to foster these feelings and practices not only for their profitability, which generates engagement and consumption of related products, but also to allow the entry of new consumable characters into the market (Yin, 2021).

This set of arguments corroborates and justifies the industry's current practice of first creating characters, being the primary transmedia product to be commercialized, through the use of various marketing and design techniques, and around them, in turn, developing the rest of the work (Azuma, 2009; Condry, 2013).

Next, we present the case studies conducted. The first refers to the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* IP, in which the visual novel was fundamental in expanding the IP's framework, exponentially fostering fan production and presenting an extremely broad array for the use of database narrative. The second refers to the *Fate* IP, a case in which the creation and diffusion of a visual novel is verified as the foundational nucleus for the gestation and growth of the IP.

6 VISUAL NOVEL: CASE STUDIES ON DATABASE LOGIC IN THE CREATION OF TRANSMEDIA IPS

6.1 NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

Given the complex ties between the visual novel industry and anime-derived media, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is identified by Azuma (2009) and Galbraith (2022) as a landmark in Japan's database narrative, consolidating practices such as the waifu framework (Britt; Britt, 2021) and the intensified cultivation of parasocial ties between characters and audiences. First released as an original TV anime in 1995, it later expanded into visual novels, manga, *gacha* games, films, and parallel derivative series, achieving major transmedia reach (Kacsuk, 2021; Kopylova, 2021; Çalik Bedir, 2021; Galbraith, 2022). As Galbraith (2022)



and Kacsuk (2021) argue, the franchise became a social phenomenon that reshaped industry logics around character design, narrative management, technology, and marketing, while also reconfiguring how otaku identity and fandom are structured through an economy centered on affective, character-based relationships across media.

It is worth noting that, despite an apparent plot related to adventure and action genres, the story unfolds in a hermetic context of psychosocial manipulations, moral and existentialist questioning, and confrontations with various traumas. The characters themselves cause these diverse feelings, where each one faces their moral and psychological issues, constituting the core of the work, which projects itself toward an imminent apocalypse, this existential essence (Galbraith, 2022). That is, it is a work with well-developed character *kyaras* that generate identification, additionally with pleasurable designs that captivates the public, a remarkable *kyarakutā*. The most popular characters from *Evangeliion* franchise are shown in Figure 6.

Even with the digital technological limitations of the 1990s, the choice of the first derivative being a visual novel served not only as an inexpensive introduction of the franchise in transmedia form to the world of electronic games but also allowed the creation of new marketable narratives from this visual novel (Çalik Bedir, 2021).

Figure 6 – Popular characters from *Neo Genesis Evangelion*



Source: Edited by the authors

Within the transmedia ecosystem of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, one of the first developments beyond the anime occurred in the field of games. In 1997, the visual novel *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Girlfriend of*



Steel was released in Japan. Years later, in 2005, the sequel *Girlfriend of Steel 2nd* reached the international public, which does not function as a direct continuation of the first title but as a parallel and autonomous narrative, with its own premises and little connection to the other central products of the franchise (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – In the left: *Genesis Evangelion: Girlfriend of Steel*, in the Right: *Genesis Evangelion: Girlfriend of Steel 2nd*



Source: PlayAsia (2025) e IMDB (s./d.)

The option for a visual novel as the initial derivative was a strategic decision. Besides being a relatively less costly format for inserting the intellectual property into the games market, it favored the expansion of the fictional universe through alternative routes and micro-plots focused on characters. In other words, the games have been operated as narrative laboratories. By shifting the story to optional paths, it opened space for new combinations of relationships, situations, and outcomes, generating reusable content that was easily marketable in other formats, converting itself into a great success in



Japan. With the most successful routes in visual novels being converted into other types of media and products with high commercial value.

This logic becomes explicit in the chain of derivations that followed. In 2004, one year before the release of *Girlfriend of Steel 2nd*, the manga *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Angelic Days* was published, which adapts and reorganizes elements that would later appear in the 2005 game, while simultaneously recovering motifs and dynamics that had proven successful with the public in the 1997 title (Çalik Bedir, 2021). In the same horizon, other official visual novels reinforced the centrality of the character as an engine of expansion: *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Ayanami Raising Project* (2001), centered on the affective development of Rei Ayanami, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Shinji Ikari Raising Project* (2004), focused on Shinji Ikari and Misato Katsuragi. In both cases, the very format of the game—based on routes and variations—facilitated the subsequent serialization into mangas that explored the most successful specific paths and consolidate the transmediality of the characters (Ruh, 2013; Kopylova, 2021; Çalik Bedir, 2021; Galbraith, 2022). All the visual novels mentioned demonstrate the flexibility of the character concept within the franchise, changing personalities, styles, designs and worlds, attempting to please a wide variety of fans and their favorite characters and variations identified.

In common, these four visual novels highlight short narratives centered on affective bonds and, above all, on romantic relationships with highly appealing characters. In contrast to the tragic and ambiguous atmosphere of the anime and films from the 1990s, these derivatives frequently offer harmonious scenarios—such as school routines and alternative endings with an everyday tone—that function as desirable “counter-scenes” for the fan. Thus, more than expanding the original plot, these products respond to a specific demand: consuming the cast in new emotional configurations, multiplying possibilities for coexistence, intimacy, and resolution, which reinforces the cycle of engagement and purchasing sustained by the franchise (Ruh, 2013; Galbraith, 2022; Çalik Bedir, 2021).

The first films of the franchise were released in 1997, in the same year as the first game, titled *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Death and Rebirth* and *The End of Evangelion*, serving as an alternative and more tragic ending to the original anime (Galbraith, 2022). Additionally, in 2004, a film quadrilogy called *Rebuild of Evangelion* began, consolidating yet another new alternative ending to the franchise, with *Evangelion: 3.0+1.01 Thrice Upon a Time* being the biggest release of 2021 in Japan. Logically, these new movie franchise create new versions of the cast and the universe, that creates a new demand for fan’s consumption, thus, derivatives.

The *Neon Genesis Evangelion* franchise constitutes one of the most successful examples of Japanese commercial transmediality, demonstrating how an intellectual property can expand organically and strategically across multiple media and productive sectors. Gainax, until 2025 was the company holding



the franchise, adopted since the 1990s a business model aimed at aggressive commercialization and extensive licensing of its iconic characters—such as Asuka Langley Soryu, Rei Ayanami, Kaworu Nagisa, and Misato Katsuragi—converting them into central vectors of identity and cultural consumption (Galbraith, 2022). This strategy encompassed not only traditional media products—manga, films, series, music, toys, and games—but also unsuspected industrial sectors, such as cosmetics and manufacturing, through corporate partnerships.

The success of the Evangelion Intellectual Property (IP), which reached an estimated revenue of US\$12 billion by 2021 (Kurten, 2022), is more deeply explained by its narrative factors and its organization in the form of a database than by mere financial metrics. This structural approach allows the franchise to transform characters into multiplatform economic assets, prioritizing the development of character-centered properties over simple market expansion (Condry, 2013).

Within this framework, the participatory production of fans functions as a series of informal creative laboratories. The systematic monitoring of fan games, *doujins*, and fan manga provides aesthetic and narrative inputs that the producer subsequently incorporates into new products and official stories (Ruh, 2013; Kopylova, 2021; Galbraith, 2022). This dynamic establishes a feedback process between the fandom and the industry, where the boundaries between “official” and “derivative” work are dissolved in favor of a logic of symbolic and affective circulation.

The strategic transition from the original anime to the visual novel format was fundamental for this development, serving as a primary environment for testing and validating new marketable narratives. These selected narratives were later materialized in other games, manga, and films, creating a synergy across different media that transformed the IP into a global social phenomenon and guaranteed its enduring business success (Fields Corporation, 2015).

6.2 FATE

The *Fate* franchise represents a paradigmatic case in the study of contemporary transmedia, illustrating how a visual novel of limited production and low initial cost can evolve into a multimedia IP of global reach, sustained by an ecosystem of derivative products, expanded narratives, and active engagement from the fan base. This phenomenon demonstrates the relevance of visual novels as low-risk narrative prototypes capable of generating significant economic returns and lasting transmedia potential.

The starting point of this trajectory dates to *Fate/stay night*, a visual novel released in 2004 by the Japanese producer Type-Moon, succeeding the experimental project *Tsukihime* (2000). The latter



functioned as a creative laboratory in which structural, aesthetic, and narrative elements were tested and refined, anticipating characteristics that would become central to *Fate/stay night*, such as the dark atmosphere, the psychological development of characters, and the narrative fragmentation into multiple routes (Cavallaro, 2009). Thus, *Tsukihime* not only provided technical insights for the development of branching narratives but also established a model of emotional and aesthetic exploration that permeates the entire franchise.

Since its conception, *Fate/stay night* stood out for the psychological and symbolic development of characters and for the integration of striking visual contrasts—that is, a good synergy between *Kyarakutā* and *Kyara*, easily identifiable by various segments of the public. The heroine Saber, indicated in Figures 2 and 5, exemplifies this approach, articulating the image of a sensitive young woman with the representation of a medieval knight, resulting in a narrative effect of tension between vulnerability and heroism, characteristic of *moe* aesthetics and the emotional dynamic present in database narrative (Azuma, 2009; Cavallaro, 2009). In a complementary manner, the character Caster, analyzed by Klug and Lebowitz (2011), represents the archetype of “The Seductress”: attractive, confident, and charismatic, but morally ambiguous. This construction expands the interpretive spectrum of the work, allowing different readings by the public and strengthening affective engagement.

The narrative fragmentation adopted in *Fate/stay night* illustrates the practical application of the database narrative concept proposed by Azuma (2009). In this model, multiple routes and alternative endings allow for the recombination of narrative elements, encourage replayability, and create a space of variable interpretation for the user. Furthermore, such characteristics constitute an open structure, ideal for transmedia expansion, allowing characters and plots to adapt to different media—from manga to animation and electronic games—enhancing the commercial and cultural value of the IP (Steinberg, 2012; Condry, 2013; Çalik Bedir, 2021).

In terms of commercial performance, *Fate/stay night* consolidated itself as one of the most successful visual novels of the early 2000s, with estimated sales of approximately 400,000 physical copies of the original PC version. This success enabled the expansion of the work to other platforms, such as PlayStation 2, in addition to mobile releases in the 2010s, and paved the way for the consolidation of a comprehensive transmedia universe that includes manga, anime, films, novels, and digital spin-offs (Cavallaro, 2009; Klug; Lebowitz, 2011).

That said, each route present in the visual novel, which explores the relationship with a different character in each one, was adapted into various media, especially anime and film, first with the anime *Fate/Stay Night* (2006), which adapted a more popular route focused on the character Saber. Subsequently, an



original prequel story to the visual novel was adapted in *Fate/Zero* (2011), demonstrating how the public desired more new narratives.

The franchise's success also extends to the film sector. The series of feature films *Fate/stay night: Heaven's Feel I - Presage Flower* (2017), *Fate/stay night: Heaven's Feel II - Lost Butterfly* (2019), and *Fate/stay night: Heaven's Feel III - Spring Song* (2020), which adapted a distinct route from the original visual novel, grossed approximately US\$70 million in global box office, with the last of these responsible for US\$17.8 million from the domestic market alone (The Numbers, 2020). In parallel, new original stories were released in anime, books, and games independent of the visual novel in parallel universes and with new characters and developed relationships, such as *Fate/EXTRA* (2010), *Fate/Apocrypha* (2017), *Fate/Grand Order Absolute Demonic Front: Babylonia* (2019), and *Fate/strange Fake* (2026). Additionally, derivative products were continuously released, including artbooks, action figures, and illustrated novels, which continue to generate significant revenues, consolidating the brand's presence in the international pop culture market (Britt; Britt, 2021). Some official *Fate* derivative products can be observed in Figure 8.

The most relevant materialization of this expansion strategy is the game *Fate/Grand Order* (FGO) (Figure 8), released in 2015 in Japan and in 2017 internationally. FGO combines visual novel and RPG elements with the *gacha* economic model and the logic of continuous updates (game-as-a-service), periodically adding new content such as characters, events, and episodic narratives to sustain engagement and prolong the IP's lifespan (Ali et al., 2019; Woods, 2022). The game has accumulated more than US\$7 billion in revenue, with approximately 81% of this amount originating from the Japanese market, 8.1% from the Chinese market, and 5.1% from the United States, consolidating itself as one of the most profitable mobile titles globally (Obedkov, 2023).

Additionally, the fan base plays a strategic role in maintaining and expanding the franchise's universe. The production of fanworks—illustrations, doujins, animations, and unofficial adaptations—exemplifies the concept of participatory culture described by Jenkins (2009) and reinforces the affective engagement between the public and the franchise. In November 2022, the Pixiv platform registered more than 1.2 million fanarts related to the series, demonstrating the vitality and indirect economic dimension of this community (Pixiv, 2025).



Figure 8 – Fate merchandise: Book (Left), Action Figure (Center); and FGO gameplay (right)



Source: Openverse (s./d.)

Given this panorama, the trajectory of the *Fate* franchise demonstrates that visual novels can function as low-risk narrative prototypes with high transmedia potential, whose fragmented structure, combined with the emotional interaction of fans and the database logic, enables the construction of far-reaching multimedia IPs that are culturally relevant and economically robust (Azuma, 2009; Cavallaro, 2009; Britt; Britt, 2021).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article has demonstrated that visual novels constitute a central device in the contemporary production of multimedia intellectual properties, especially when analyzed in light of database narrative and the participatory culture associated with otaku subculture. The combination of narrative fragmentation, character centrality, and aesthetic modularity proved decisive for the transmedia expansion of cultural works, by allowing the continuous recombination of narrative elements with reduced economic risk and high engagement potential.

The analysis of the Neon Genesis Evangelion and Fate cases demonstrated distinct yet convergent trajectories of IP consolidation. In the first, an original anime expanded across multiple media by transforming characters into central assets of symbolic and economic circulation; in the second, a low-cost initial visual novel functioned as a narrative prototype, validating characters and fictional universes before their expansion into games, animations, and film products. In both cases, the database logic sustained the multiplicity of narratives, alternative endings, and derivations, both official and fan-



produced. The market data analyzed corroborate that, in the context of the Japanese cultural industry, economic value progressively shifts from narrative linearity to the systematic exploitation of characters as creative and commercial platforms. In this sense, visual novels stand out as privileged environments for narrative experimentation, formation of parasocial bonds, and testing the acceptance of fictional universes, consolidating themselves as strategic vectors for the creation and longevity of transmedia IPs.

It is therefore concluded that the adoption of visual novels as the initial nucleus of narrative development constitutes a technically efficient and economically rational strategy for the contemporary cultural industry, with relevant implications for future studies on transmedia, creative economy, and the global circulation of cultural products.

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