The Construction of Transmedial Characters by Fans and Industry

ABSTRACT: This paper explores how audiences build/actualize transmedial characters by studying the way in which fan fiction writers recreate the character of Toshizō Hijikata (Hakuoki). It proposes that transmedial characters can be understood as a network of recognizable traits and relations built from several media instantiations. It finally argues that considering the performative dimension of fan fiction writing can yield more productive analyses than focusing on canon, consistency or faithfulness to a historical truth.

KEYWORDS: transmedial, characters, Otome games, fan fiction

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The Many Faces of Toshizō Hijikata

Susana Tosca

Introduction

Characters are central units of meaning when stories expand across media. Even so, the topic is somewhat underexplored in the field of transmedia studies despite some important contributions dealing with issues like iconicity, identity and cohesion from a producer-franchise perspective (Evans; Bertetti; Pearson). Recent works have contributed reader response-grounded perspectives that address the discursive struggles around the representation and reception of transmedial characters, seen as relational (Thon) or dynamic (Blom). Different angles notwithstanding, this body of literature is invested in an ontological approach to transmedial characters, while the discursive operations by which they come into being still remain obscure. Building upon my audience-centric understanding of transmedial worlds (Tosca and Klastrup), I argue in this paper that a focus on how audiences build transmedial characters in derivative works, such as fan fiction, can shed light on the processes through which transmedial characters are produced in acts of creation.

The above mentioned works all consider that transmedial characters are not monolithic stable units, and they advance different definitions to embrace their multiplicity. Nevertheless, a concern with the concept of canon lingers, which, as Joleen Blom points out, is problematic, because it risks reducing “the complexity of a character’s identity to a single coherent existence” (101). I would even add that the preoccupation with canon very often privileges one medium (and one producer), while other media texts are seen as derivative or secondary, which is problematic in relation to a thorough transmedial approach. Instead, if we abandon the ambition of fixing a character as a coherent unit and focus instead on how fan fiction writers play an active role in re-imagining transmedial characters, we are better able to glimpse multiplicity in flux, as it were, while it is being produced. As I make this case, I draw on my many years of experience as a fan fiction writer and on my conversations about writing characters with others in the community, as well as the analysis of a corpus of 214 fictions.

The paper will first present its case, the transmedial character of Hijikata, especially as he is depicted in the game *Hakuoki*, and use it as a vehicle to explain “the wheel of character,” a heuristic model that I made to illustrate the idea of character as network of traits. Then, a brief analysis of *Hakuoki* fan fiction from a networked perspective will follow, leading to a conclusion about the performative dimension of transmedial characters supported by roleplaying games and fan fiction scholarship.
A Network of Hijikatas

Toshizō Hijikata was a real person who lived in the Bakumatsu period in Japan. We know that he was the vice-commander of the Shinsengumi, a samurai police force loyal to the shōgun, and that he died in 1869 in the Boshin war. And yet we don’t really know much about him. There are brief mentions in historical documents or contemporary’s letters, a couple of photographs showing a handsome man, a few of the poems he wrote, and some anecdotes, passed down orally within the family. However, there is no glimpse of the man behind the soldier and his deeds. In history, the Shinsengumi are depicted as a brutal unit, and Hijikata as an unforgiving leader fond of ordering his subordinates to commit seppuku and torturing suspects. We can only guess at the motivations and intimate life of such a man, who has become a historical figure and a fictional character. In Jens Eder’s words, fictional characters are “identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artifacts” (18). In Hijikata’s case, the identifiable traits come very much from the historical source, while his inner life is rendered anew in every instantiation. And there are many: poems, short stories, songs, novels, films, T. V. series, anime series, theatre, videogames, musicals, board games, festivals.

As Rose Lee has studied, the members of the Shinsengumi (specially their vice-commander) are romanticized in popular culture despite their minimal historical importance, most notably through the novel Moeyo Ken or the taiga drama Shinsengumi!! The Last Days of Hijikata Toshizō. Japanese audiences love the story of the underdog hero, since many Shinsengumi members, including Hijikata, were originally not of samurai descent, but managed to rise through the ranks of a rigid society. Hijikata’s key role in this struggle is established by the novel Moeyo Ken and reproduced in all following products: “Toshizō successfully disciplines and organises the group into a powerful military corps by adopting makoto (sincerity) as trademark and adopting Kyokuchū hatto, a strict code of conduct” (Lee 175). He is pictured as ruthless, fiercely loyal to his commander Isami Kondō, and a talented swordsman. As Lee notes, his tragic end adds to his mythical dimension, since Hijikata “willingly advances to his death at the enemies’ hands because dying in combat as the Shinsengumi vice commander completes his self-actualisation” (178). He becomes the symbol of the struggle of Japan’s tradition against the destructive forces of modernity. He is not just a samurai, an essential archetype in Japanese culture, but, according to the many media depictions, possibly the last one worthy of that name, including the game in focus in this chapter.

Hakuoki: Shinsengumi Kitan, developed by Idea Factory in 2008, kickstarts a successful franchise of games, anime series, films, musicals, light novels, manga and more. It tells the story of Chizuru (the player’s character), a girl who ends up in the custody of the Shinsengumi. Her disappeared father is mixed up in a conspiracy to create supernatural vampire-like warriors (called furies) to be used in the coming civil war. Hakuoki belongs to the Otome genre, where the player can pursue romance with a few male characters to choose from. Despite its romantic theme and a few supernatural elements, the plot of the game closely follows the historical events of the fall of the Shogunate. Hijikata is a popular boyfriend choice for players of the game.
and is also the love interest in the anime and movie versions of the story. *Hakuoki*’s Hijikata, voiced by popular seiyuu Miki Shin-ichiro, is just as handsome and heroic as in all other media, faithful to commander Kondō and ruthless in his quest for glory. At the beginning, Chizuru is afraid of Hijikata’s angry temper, but gradually, he shows a caring nature following her beneficial influence. That is, the game lets the player “transform” Hijikata, actualizing the romantic trope of the virgin and the redeeming force of her pure love.

*Hakuoki*’s Hijikata is closely related to all his other versions across media, that all together form a recognizable entity best understood as a network of floating traits, features, and relations, allowing for nuances and variations. We can illustrate this in the form of a character wheel, with the historical figure at the centre, adding rings as different media instantiations adapt, expand, and modify the known basic traits. For instance, historical records tell us that Hijikata was called the devil vice-commander (*oni no fukuchō*), so writers must consider how they will render this trait: was he cruel in fights? A sadistic torturer? Was he too strict with his subordinates? Or is this just slander spread by the winning side? The same facts appear in very different lights according to the way we explain them. The most well-known renderings of the character (*Moeyo Ken*, NHK’s *Taiga Drama*, and *Hakuoki*) have their own way of turning history into fiction, dwelling on some traits and ignoring others. For example, the historic Hijikata’s promiscuous behaviour and vanity (boasting of the many letters his lovers sent him) is not very developed in the novel and drama, and totally absent in the game, where he is uninterested in women unless the player chooses him as a lover. In general, the fictional Hijikata is not villainous, unlike the historical one, so even his most unsavoury deeds are justified or directly ignored.
This wheel is not a complete mapping of the character, as there are more media that have dealt with Hijikata, but it covers the best-known representations. Also, the traits are not categorized, and belong to different realms: physical, personality, genre conventions, etc. If we were to address the ontological status of such a character in a systematic manner, other approaches would be necessary, such as Eder's four-level heuristic character reception model, also known as the clock of character (21). But let us pretend that eclecticism is acceptable, because my focus here is not to map the character exhaustively, but to illustrate the combinatorial and networked quality of transmedial character writing, and how fan fiction writers construct him in relational and performative strategies.

**Hakuoki Fan Fiction**

*Hakuoki* fan fiction depictions of Hijikata can be analyzed using this wheel of character. As a text source, I turned to *Archive of Our Own*, an independent online fan fiction repository that in October 2019 housed 683 fictions inspired by the *Hakuoki* franchise, where Hijikata was tagged as main character in 214 of them. These texts form
the analytic corpus for this essay. I read all the fictions, coded each text, and identified character traits. On a second round of analysis, the codes were grouped according to relations and patterns, paying attention to both similarities and differences in how traits were rendered. I returned to the wheel and used it to map several different paths through the different layers. For instance, even though all the examined texts agree on the inner trait “Devoted to Kondō” as a basic trait of this character, some explore it in connection with “self-sacrificing,” leading to heroic stories of trying to save the Shinsengumi and provide glory for Kondō, while others prefer to connect it to a penchant for “living aesthetically” and being “capable of great tenderness,” leading to tales of homosexual love. Even a single trait can spawn many variations; for example, “represses own feelings” generates stories of Hijikata doubting, having a hard time to confess his love for Chizuru, as well as stories where he cannot bring himself to tell his soldiers what the Shinsengumi mean to him (and ends up antagonizing them instead).

In truly transmedial manner, the writers are inspired by different media instantiations or specific outcomes/routes of the game, and often annotate their texts to situate the reader. Some refer only to the game, others incorporate knowledge from the anime, the T. V. drama, or the historical records, yet others integrate crossovers with other games or anime series. Many of the combinations couldn’t exist within the same possible world, and others mix plot elements and character traits belonging to different media platforms. Quite a few fill gaps not covered in any of the existing media instantiations, for example by writing about Hijikata’s childhood or transporting him to future settings (a high school, a modern police department). Nevertheless, I found that in all fictions, the inner core of character traits was universally maintained. However, the paths through the wheel were surprisingly varied, mostly by offering alternate explanations to the reasons and thoughts behind Hijikata’s decisions. As an example, here are two versions of the reaction to the same event: the vice-commander needs to deal with a traitorous internal group:

But Itou is his biggest fucking problem. He's pretty sure the “faction” he is forming will soon break away. While Hijikata has half a mind to let them do that, he knows that problems won't be solved just because Itou is separate. [...] It's like . . . no one wants him to listen. What, did he suddenly become someone who can't be trusted with secrets or worries? Souji as a default doesn't open up to him. But Heisuke's more distant each day, Yukimura says nothing, and he feels like they might as well all cut out their tongues and resort to gestures to get everything done. [...] But that's chasing foolish, useless thoughts. Hijikata doesn't deal with “if only’s” or “what if’s.” He deals in many solutions and picking the best one.
It would be a lie to say he didn't expect it might come down to something like this. The only good way to keep a poisonous snake from returning to your house is to cut its head off. [...] It's Hijikata's job to hold everything together, to protect what they've made, and what they have yet to accomplish. [...] It's costly, and Hijikata doesn't want to make Heisuke pay for that alone. Not that kid, not one of his captains, one of the family. Still, if it's Kondo and the Shinsengumi or letting Heisuke fall to whatever fate they may have to hand to the Guardians—It's a nonstarter. There is no choice there, but that doesn't change anything about the way dread curls up inside his ribs and melts over each bone.}

Hijikata here has more regrets. We see a self-convincing maneuver, a way to push himself towards a decision he doesn't want to take. He cannot let go, and this will haunt him later. The variation is subtle, and maybe only of interest to hardcore fans. However, I find it fascinating that the writers manage to tell different stories even though the plot point is the same. By filling in the gaps of what Hijikata is thinking at key moments, they manage to exercise endless creativity in exploring the inner life of the character. This is also achieved by adding “extra” scenes to the fixed events from the game, like in the following “domestic” example:

The content feeling led Hijikata down a path of thoughts that surrounded his sentiments toward the young woman lying on his futon, and he immediately put his head in his hands in a shoddy attempt to stop himself from thinking any further on the subject. He knew he was growing attached to her, which was something he really thought was a bad idea. His chosen path in life was not one he meant to share with a woman, nor did he think it right of him to ask one to do so. [...] Before he closed his eyes, he took one more look at the sleeping young woman in his bed, wishing he could be there instead. Yet, he knew this decision was for the best. In the morning, this would be forgotten and they would move on. And he could continue to deny his blossoming love for the young lady from Edo.

The fragment does explain Hijikata’s reticence to get involved in a love affair, although his train of thought feels very contemporary. The text projects modern sensibilities onto an inhabitant of nineteenth-century Japan who has never heard of Freud. However, this is not off-putting for the audience, since it makes the text resonate with the modern reader’s sensibilities, humanizing the character. Indeed, love, is the other important theme in the fictions, also obviously influenced by this game’s genre. As Elizabeth Woledge suggests, a central feature of fan fiction “is the exploration of intimacy” (99). Hijikata is mostly paired with Chizuru, although some writers write themselves onto the stories or prefer homosexual pairings. In all cases, love is not easy for the vice-commander. In the previous fragment, he was responsible and tender. In other stories, his lust is darker, such as in the following instance, when he acts upon his infatuation with one of his men:
Hijikata pressed himself into Yamazaki, his skin was on fire. [. . .] Something in the younger man’s voice had triggered him, Yamazaki’s sudden vulnerability had awakened a primal need for control, not only over Susumu but over everyone. There and then though his senses were filled only with Yamazaki; his small, almost feminine lips were soft and moist, his skin had the faint scent of yuzu oil, citrusy and comforting. [. . .] [H]e pressed his muscular body into Yamazaki’s, hungrily, selfishly. He wanted to dominate him, prove he was powerful, and that he could control the regiment and everyone in it with that power.¹⁴

This brief excursion through the archive has hopefully demonstrated another layer we can add to the wheel, and that in turn can influence further instantiations.¹⁵
Performative Characters in Fan Fiction

This paper has argued how transmedial characters are a network of traits whose actualization always has a performative dimension. The wheel of character is a heuristic device that hopefully illustrates the process by which fan fiction (and other) writers recreate characters and can help us transcend canon’s preoccupation with a “right” version of a character. For instance, the Disney writers now working on the projected Obi Wan Kenobi series are also having to relate to a vast map of interconnected traits and relations engendered in different media renditions of the character. The basic traits that make the character identifiable cannot be rejected, but each communicative artifact is uniquely constructed, connecting the dots across layers in many different ways. This might seem a bit paradoxical: a moving network of traits that has a stable centre. However, I propose that we think of this centre as also dynamic, where redefinitions are possible, in struggles of the interpretive community.

Writing a new instantiation of a transmedial character can be compared with the process of playing a character in a tabletop or live roleplaying game. Each player gives shape to a quantified set of traits in their character sheet, producing actual behaviour and dialogue that can generate the collective on-the-go narration. Even in the case of original characters not based on a particular fiction, there are transmedial operations at work. Daniel Mackay proposes that role-players perform characters by actualizing strips of imaginary behaviour borrowed from popular culture (81). These strips are also part of the traits of my wheel here. For instance, the anime trope of the tsundere is one of the schemata applied to Hijikata. Fan fiction writers make schemata come alive, performing them not just by telling but by showing in a process fraught with combinatorial creativity.

Fan fiction, like roleplaying, is a theatrical genre, as Francesca Coppa has argued. Following performance scholar Richard Schechner, Coppa argues that the “official” texts made by the producers become “more like a blueprint for a production—a thing used to make another thing” (237). In this framework, characters are “a set of actions, a behavioural script” (233) that we have created collectively: “in theatre, we want to see your Hamlet and his Hamlet and her Hamlet; to embody the role is to reinvent it” (236). So even though transmedial texts use the same event chronology and the same basic set of assumptions about a character, they all realise them in unique ways. And the more a character is recreated, the stronger a talisman it becomes, packed with multiple meanings that resonate with the ever-returning transmedial audiences.

Endnotes

1. Although I haven’t authored any fictions in the corpus analyzed here.
2. The Bakumatsu is a period in Japanese history that covers the years 1853 to 1867. It marks the end of the feudal Edo period (1185–1868), where power was held by the Tokugawa shogunate. In these final years, Japan was forced out of its isolationism and had to open its ports to foreign trade. After a civil war, with intervention of Western powers, the shogunate was abolished, the Emperor restored and the Meiji era started, where Japan would be drastically modernized.
3. The shogun was the title of the military rulers of Japan in the Edo period.
5. Taiga drama (大河ドラマ) means “big river drama” and refers to the historical television series that the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) produces and broadcasts annually.
6. Here some of the Shinsengumi captains, the vice-commander, and their main antagonist.
7. See note 2.
8. For example with tags such as “canon verse Kyoto Winds,” “Hijikata’s route after battle of Toba-Fushimi,” or “Hakuoki SSL Universe.”
9. Even the few stories set in a contemporary world adapt the basic traits to believable alternatives. For instance, in a high school setting Hijikata won’t force others to commit seppuku, but will be a very strict headmaster, giving tiresome punishment.
13. In her article, specifically slash fiction.
15. For instance, when the game company organizes events where the voice actors of the game do live drama and play upon some of the fan fiction conventions, like homoerotic tension.
16. And their audience success with The Mandalorian might hint that they will also take the fans into account.
17. An initially cold person that later shows love.
18. Kurt Lancaster, argues that roleplaying is not just empty pastiche, because “fans shape their texts with Schechnerian stripes of behaviour, applying them in new ways. The process of restoring this performance leads the reader into the act of imagining the actors performing in new scenes built from these stored strips of performance behaviour” (133).

Works Cited


As Tosca notes, the malleability of Hijikata is far from unique and occurs in professional practice as much as it does in fan practices, as alluded to in her closing reference to Obi-Wan Kenobi. James Bond, for example, is always a suave, womanizing spy working for the British secret service, but the most recent version portrayed by Daniel Craig plays up his brutality and self-doubt in way that Roger Moore's more effortlessly debonair version does not. The Sherlock Holmes of Robert Downey Jr and Guy Ritchie is highly intelligent and capable of marvellous feats of deductive reasoning but embraces physicality (both in appearance and actions) in a way that Benedict Cumberbatch and Stephen Moffat's self-professed sociopath (also highly intelligent and capable of marvellous feats of deductive reasoning) does not (Evans). There are clear parallels between how characters are transformed transmedially within fandom and how they are transformed by media industry practitioners. However, in this brief response to Tosca's insightful essay, I want to focus on the differences between transformations by fans and by industry practitioners in order to highlight how each group exercises its agency over transmedial characters.

Fans and media practitioners work within very different creative parameters. These differences lead to varying levels of agency over a character but not, perhaps, in ways one might initially suspect. Both transmedial characters and fandoms particularly emerge from hyperdiegetic texts (Hills) that are characterised by narrative gaps. Key moments or background information are left out, leaving a jigsaw with certain missing pieces that audiences can fill in. The fact that characters are manifestations of people (historical figures or not) adds to these gaps, as the contradictions and nuances of what make up an individual are so complex that no narrative, no matter how large, can encompass all of them. This complexity in turn leaves arguably even more space for agency, creativity, and variation than plots and narrative events do. It may be tempting to see the comparative status of media practitioner and audience within the creative play of filling in gaps in transmedial characters as a hierarchy. The creator (or adapter) of a storyworld is the one to leave the gaps behind, whether intentionally or not. Audiences are then able to choose which gaps they want to fill and how. This seems to imply a situation where the media practitioner has ultimate control over the storyworld, with audiences exerting creative agency when and where they are allowed. However, although practitioners may hold a more culturally prominent role in the creation of transmedial characters, examining the ways industrial context may shape and limit practitioners’ choices prompts us to question such a hierarchy and consider the ways fans have greater freedom to reshape characters how they want.
Multiple industrial factors, including cultural norms, intellectual property rights, production cultures, expectations around narrative formats, brand identities, and programming strategies, may shape how a character is transformed just as much as any individual practitioner's artistic preferences. Roberta Pearson, for example, has argued that the particular industrial priorities within publishing, theatre and film at the turn of the 20th century, shaped the very first transmedia versions of Sherlock Holmes (see also Evans). In perhaps the most extreme example of a character with literally "many faces," the central character of Doctor Who changes their body and personality when they are mortally wounded and "regenerate" (though in fitting with Tosca's model, they retain a semi-stable personality core). The Doctor's malleability is itself a key component of their character, one that has been a source of creativity and agency for numerous writers and actors on the program. However, regeneration only came about because of the program's early production context when the first actor to play the role, William Hartnell, had to retire due to ill health (Chapman 49). The BBC wanted the successful program—and character—to continue and so the early Doctor Who producers were forced to adapt the character when they were unable to continue with Hartnell. The Doctor's regenerative capabilities were born out of industrial strategy and necessity. The way that characters change or are adapted within media industry produced content emerge from the practices, parameters, and expectations of that industry (see Hewitt).

Fans, however, are free to interpret characters however they choose. Star Trek producers could not create a romantic relationship between Captain Kirk and Spock even if they wanted to due to the regulatory limitations and cultural context of 1960s US television (Tulloch and Jenkins). Star Trek fans, however, famously could (see, for example, Jones). Fans can change racial or ethnic identities as happened in Harry Potter fan fiction and fan art long before Black actress Noma Dumezweni was cast as Hermione, a role previously "officially" depicted as white (see Fowler; Kirkpatrick). Fans can mix storyworlds regardless of who owns the intellectual property, allowing The Doctor to meet, interact with and be shaped by Harry Potter or Captain Kirk should they so wish. As an extreme example, they can have characters involved in actions that may be avoided by industry practitioners aiming for a wide public audience or that would face scrutiny from regulators or commentators, such as BDSM or incest (McCracken 155–156). If industry structures, strategies, and priorities place limits on how professional media practitioners can transform characters, the only limits placed on fans are those of their imaginations.

Tosca's model offers a valuable way of exploring and mapping how character traits can be emphasised, ignored, or transformed as a character moves transmedially. It is also worth considering how those processes are enabled or constrained by the comparative contexts in which creativity happens. Whilst the media industries offer spaces for characters to be adapted and reworked by professional creators, their capacity for transformation in comparison with fandom is, in many ways, limited. Perhaps more so than the events of a storyworld, character opens up spaces for audiences to assert their agency. By filling in the missing moments, motivations, and thought process, they are able to work with and around the "dynamic centre" of a character. This process in turn highlights the varying levels of agency that media practitioners and
audiences have over a text, and questions assumptions that media practitioners are the “owners” of media worlds. While they (or at least the organisations they work for) may own intellectual property rights, audiences assert their independence through practices of interpretation and creativity.

**Works Cited**


Response to Elizabeth Evans

I AM VERY GRATEFUL TO ELIZABETH EVANS for such an insightful and generous text. It engages dialogically with mine and repairs some omissions in my argument without framing them as shortcomings. While my piece mostly focuses on individual fan choice and imaginative renderings in successive media layers, her response reminds us that none of this creative activity happens in a cultural vacuum. Most importantly, her text complicates the notion of agency in productive ways, going beyond simplistic understandings and taken-for-granted hierarchies.

For what is power in the context of transmedial character writing? A common assumption in media studies is that producers and IP owners are most powerful because they get to decide which transmedial expansions and renditions are to be part of the canon. In this view, fan fiction writers would always operate in the margins, outside and below the actual power structures. However, what if we understood power as the ability to freely imagine? Maybe specially when these imaginings can go against the dominant discourses of any given time. If we truly care about reception and the ways in which texts become intertwined with people´s lives, this second perspective becomes as important as the first.

By pointing to the constraints exerted by industrial priorities and economic necessity, Evans shows how producers are (perhaps paradoxically) less free than their audiences when it comes to exploring new expressive avenues afforded by ideological shifts in society in general. The character of James Bond can again serve as a good illustration of this. The fan fiction community had been pairing him with men for many years, but it wasn´t until Skyfall (2012) that an official Bond film embraces a queer reading of the character in his interrogation by villain Raoul Silva. This scene would never have been part of one of the films shot in the 60s, 70s, or 80s, even as fan fiction was gaining momentum before its popularity explosion with the dissemination of the Internet in the late 1990s. Audiences can exert creative agency in less constrained ways, exploring controversial topics much earlier than their becoming acceptable for society in general (if ever).

I closed my initial text agreeing with Francesca Coppa´s observation that characters are behavioral strips that are created collectively, packing different meanings that resonate with transmedial audiences. Taking Evans's attention to context into account, I would like to add that these meanings are part of wider structures of thought that connect imaginative practices to the imaginaries of their time, as well as to the material conditions of productions of the involved media industries. The case of Hijikata can illustrate specific questions related to the ways in which we recreate history in popular culture, or to how Japanese tropes are appropriated by transmedial Western audiences. Beyond these concrete topics, the wheel of character serves as a way to make some of these layered relationships visible in ways that can illuminate our understanding of transmedial texts, characters, and why audiences keep coming back.