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Media mix and character marketing in *Madoka Magica*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the development of the media franchise Mahō shōjo Madoka magika/Puella Magi Madoka Magica *from the perspective of the growth of character media ecologies. Originating as a 2011 anime series,* Madoka Magica *presented a critically acclaimed narrative featuring a dark, traumatic take on the magical girl genre of media. Outside this narrative context, however,* Madoka Magica *has developed into a vibrant array of media products, including manga, video games, character merchandising and cross-promotional brand marketing, with little to no reference in these products to the dark context of the chronologically prior characters. Characters who were brutally killed in one context become smiling ambassadors for convenience stores in another; the monsters fought against become cohabiting associates, if not allies, between texts. By focusing on the marketing, proliferation and malleability of the* Madoka Magica *characters, and the brand's evident emphasis on the characters' affective potential outside the narrative context of the original series, this article highlights the multiplicity of characters within the brand's officially produced media mix. Examining the production of the brand as a totality of products becomes a staging point for future analysis into character marketing more broadly, and the divergent approaches to such marketing across a global context.*

Following its premiere in early 2011, the anime series *Mahō shōjo Madoka magika/Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011) quickly became an international

hit. In the series, the titular Madoka is an ordinary junior high school girl who, together with her friend Sayaka, is introduced to a world which exists in parallel with their own ordinary lives: a world where magical girls fight evil creatures called Witches in order to save humankind from their corrupting influence. Featuring a colourful cast of protagonists, monstrous opponents, and an apocalyptic struggle to save loved ones, on the surface – and from its title – *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* would seem to be following in a similar mould as the historic construction of the mahō shōjo (magical girl) genre of Japanese popular culture. However, over the twelve episodes of the series, many of the historic narrative and thematic conventions of the genre are questioned, overturned and re-negotiated in a dark and often horror-driven narrative that directly questions how and why teenage girls have been so elevated as heroic figures in Japanese popular culture. Often defined through its consistent usage of a set of common visual and thematic elements, participation in the mahō shōjo genre is commonly marked through conventions such as magically empowered young female protagonists, magical companion creatures, and on a more overarching thematic level, the capacity of love and good-hearted people to overcome all evil. The history of the genre and its constituent texts, however, is a contested site – definitions of 'magical girl' have gone through multiple distinct eras of creation and consumption, reflecting the nature of genres to adjust and shift progressively through processes of engagement and reflection. *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, by pushing boundaries of form and function within the elements associated with magical girl, contributes to an ongoing assessment of not only what the genre is, but what the genre can be.

Equally contested is whether the genre is best considered from a narrativist perspective or a capitalist one. Kumiko Saito (2014: 144) has argued that, contrary to western visions of genre, the magical girl territory is most practically defined by its business structure, with its narrative and visual conventions serving primarily to sell commodities and, secondarily, being engaging narratives in their own right. The diverse anime texts associated with the genre, therefore, can be seen as supplementary support for the sale of commodities. In similar fashion, the anime series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* does not stand alone, but forms one aspect of what we can consider the *Madoka Magica* 'media mix', a term referring to a media franchise's production and release of interconnected products across a wide range of platforms (such as animation and manga) and commodity types (such as figurines and t-shirts). Marc Steinberg describes this state of media mix as being a 'serial interconnection of commodities' (2006: 192), where these products do not stand alone but interrelate, typically through the existence of particular characters or narratives. Synergy, rather than the promotion of single commodities, is a goal unto itself for the anime media mix. It is this media mix which has been opined by Toei Animation President Takahashi Hiroshi as the key to the global success of Japanese animation, as 'Japanese animation companies are just the best in the world at getting the media mix right' (cited in Steinberg 2006: 192). Steinberg's in-depth study of media mix, however, primarily addresses *Tetsuwan Atomu*/*Astro Boy* (Tezuka 1963), which focused on the adventures of a robot boy protagonist. In undertaking an analysis of *Madoka Magica*, adjustments must therefore be made in approach to acknowledge the divergent positioning of *Madoka Magica* as emerging both from a long-established tradition of magical girl media mix practices and an assumed audience outside the typical demographic associated with the genre.

In the eight years since its premiere, the *Madoka Magica* brand has followed the media mix model, with its expansive library of commodities including approximately seventy volumes of manga, three films, a stage play, lines of pachinko machines and nearly a dozen video games, along with countless figurines and other collectible merchandise. With these commodities come new narratives and new characters, together with new connections between the brand and others, such as convenience store chains, fashion labels and sweets companies. Perhaps the most notable distinction between the anime series and its successive texts is the shift in tone: the same characters that suffered and died in the series laugh alongside their monstrous enemies in the manga, hawk Lawson products in cross-promotional branding, or are re-imagined as kindergarten students, housewives and pets. This juxtaposition between the conceptual original work and successive iterations is not in itself unusual in media mix practices. Beyond the divergent versions of *Astro Boy* Steinberg (2012: 188–90) identifies, *Shin seiki evangerion*/*Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Anno 1994), one of the most iconic and identifiable anime media mix brands, presents a stark juxtaposition between the events and characterizations depicted in its anime series and those depicted in the manga versions, or the strip mahjong video games. Yet this expansion across media beyond adaptation – that is, a transposition of a singular narrative across multiple media platforms – and through diverse avenues of expression and re-imagination into new, narratively independent texts is often overlooked, or put aside as secondary to the analysis of meanings found within a single key work. Here, therefore, I discuss how the *Madoka Magica* brand commodities have been produced and consumed, and how these processes fit within and evade existing visions of media mix franchising. Moreover, what does it indicate that a series so heavily built on reinterpreting the conventions of the magical girl genre outside its historically child-friendly positioning was now being repositioned back into a cute framework?

Taking the theoretical approaches to media mix under consideration, here I examine how and why these characters – traumatized, psychologically scarred, and in some cases deceased within their originating narrative – have been drawn upon time and time again in myriad, often discursive, officially produced texts. Although the narrative of the anime series will be further discussed to give context to the discussion, I shift attention away from a focused examination of a single text in favour of analysis of the dispersal of a diverse range of texts, along with the range of consumer–producer engagements which eschew singular visions of any true nature, context or vision of these characters. This article thereby discusses the developmental history of the *Madoka Magica* media franchise, with particular emphasis on how the brand and its producers have successfully proliferated the characters across a multitude of media formats and contexts in unison. By highlighting the brand's ongoing emphasis on the distribution and marketing of character-image over narrative cohesion or continuity, I illustrate that the continued success of the brand is found in leveraging the affective potential of design elements rather than reinforcing any specific vision of meaning or context for characters and their worlds.

NARRATIVE, CHARACTER AND MODEL

Before addressing *Madoka Magica* specifically, it is pertinent to examine the theoretical approaches that background the Japanese media consumption and production processes discussed above. Media franchising has an essential

relationship with anime media production practices, to the extent that Saito (2014: 144) establishes that as a general rule, anime productions function at a perpetual loss, with returns only expected after merchandising income begins to trickle in. However, what holds a media mix together, and what encourages ongoing consumer engagement, has long been a heavily theorized territory.

Ōtsuka Eiji, discussing media franchises in the late 1980s, argued that the central aspect of a brand was not necessarily the quality of the individual product, but how those products wove into one another (2010: 104). Pointing to a variety of brands popular in the late 1980s, Ōtsuka argues that the most valuable component of these works was how beneath the surface of any individual text (such as an individual episode of an anime series) there existed a world of fiction which was only accessible through continuous consumption of the brand (2010: 104). In consuming individual texts, consumers were accessing not only the physical commodity itself, but the fantasy that commodity offered access to – one which existed beneath the surface, unable to be grasped in totality through any individual text. But the increasing consumer engagement with fantasy commodities, and thereby an increased focus on individual interaction with fantasy, brings with it changes in the hierarchy of creator and consumer. Drawing on the popularity of amateur manga production and the historic creative practices in kabuki theatre, Ōtsuka argues that unlike duplication of a creative work (which would constitute forgery), the creation of a new story within a fictional universe can only be judged by its relationship and consistency with the totality of the grand narrative (2010: 109–10). Ōtsuka contends that fictional grand narratives present an implicit danger to the producer–consumer relationship by virtue of their existence as fantasy, connected only to fragmentary elements – if a producer was to allow the totality of the grand narrative to be grasped by consumers, they could lose control of it (2010: 109–10). Effectively, by shifting away from tangible commodities, the producers of fantasy commodities may effectively remove the original work's privileged status, with all narratives (officially or fan-produced) simply becoming one of the infinite possible dramas within the total grand narrative.

Ōtsuka's envisioning of media creativity becoming increasingly democratized to the point where consumers begin to create and consume commodities on their own terms, has been described as utopian by some (Looser 2017: 352). However, as Steinberg (2012: 180) illustrates, Ōtsuka was a media producer himself, and an employee of Kadokawa Media Office, one of the historic key players in the development of media mix production practices; his academic approach to narrative stemmed from the important question of how publishers would survive in a world of diffused narrative production. This suggests that his remarks, rather than truly utopian, may be attempting to reconcile this new state of affairs with how authors (and their publishers) can retain control of their fantasy commodities. In this vein, Steinberg illustrates how Ōtsuka's own long-running manga, *Tajū jinkaku tantei saiko*/*Multi-Personality Detective Psycho* (1997–2016), exercised such control by never allowing the full grand narrative to come into sight, constantly shifting and evading concrete understandings, preventing any individual consumer from grasping the totality (2012: 180–82). In addition, by purposefully leaving inconsistencies or gaps in the fiction, the opportunity lay open for fans to both consume works and engage in secondary fan production, without threatening the control of both author and publisher. In effect, through constant engagement and expansion of a singular, yet fragmentary vision, the owner of a fantasy commodity can maintain control over their intellectual property.

Steinberg, drawing on Ōtsuka's work in his robust analysis of media mix marketing practices, argues that the centralizing force behind the success of Japanese media mix strategies lies in the power of the character as 'an abstract, circulating element that maintains the consistency of the various worlds or narratives and holds them together' (2012: 188). Illustrated characters, such *Astro Boy*'s titular Astro Boy, serve a powerful function for a brand, in that their iconic design can be maintained with visual consistency across a variety of narrative and non-narrative platforms, and through certain commodities allow an extension of the world beyond the scope of a fragmentary narrative. Steinberg argues how stickers and other commodities allowed Astro Boy to escape the temporal confines of specific magazines or television timeslots, and instead created a continuous consumption where there was little time for a child to be separated from Astro Boy (2012: 144–45). This breaking of temporal confines, however, also extended to fiction, as the *Astro Boy* brand's divergent narratives between manga and anime incarnations exemplifies – Astro Boy could die in one narrative and be alive in another, yet the power of the character is such that it 'allow[s] these divergent series to be read, despite their incongruities, as existing within a larger, yet unitary world' (2012: 190). The character thereby opens possibilities of new narratives through constant engagement yet unifies these narratives together. In sum, Steinberg argues that the anime media mix creates three simultaneous articulations of character: the character merchandise, the fictional world that merchandise belongs to, and the character as an 'immaterial connective agent guaranteeing the consistency of this ever-expanding world' (2012: 200).

Discourse surrounding the construction of characters in Japanese popular culture emphasizes the importance of negotiating the concept of kyara. Kyara, itself a shortening of the Japanese pronunciation of character (kyarakutā), has been used since the 1990s in reference to figurines, toys and games derived from characters found within anime, manga and other narratively driven texts (Lunning 2015: 78). However, Itō Gō (2005: 94–95) instead reverses this order, asserting that it is the kyara – the narrative-less, iconic figure – that exists prior to the character, and provides the character with both a sonzai-kan (sense of existence) and seimeikan (sense of life). As Thomas Lamarre (2011: 129) expands, the kyara is thus the ontologically prior, and primary, proto-character, free of the constraints of narrative that the character is firmly embedded within. Although characters are attached to narratives and their existence outside these narratives questioned, the kyara is free to be articulated within a varied range of contexts and remain within existence outside of the constraints of narrative. Steinberg (2012: 83–85) illustrates how the extension of the character image outside of narrative through stickers, amongst other non-narrative commodities, allows for the extension of the character's world into that of the consumer. The proliferation of kyara is therefore connected to established notions of pleasurable practice, with the iconic and image-based consumption of the kyara connecting with consumer practices that Lien Fan Shen (2007: 11–12) identifies as being key to understanding the pleasure of anime media mix consumption. The characters of anime media culture, and female characters in particular, become what Frenchy Lunning describes as 'a constellation of mere characteristics: fragments of personality traits, physical attributes, tendencies, mannerisms, idiosyncrasies, and beloved quirks' (2015: 78), and these traits – described as moe yōso (moe elements) by Azuma (2009: 42) – are a key aspect of anime media mix practices.

Although characters may often be described as moe, Patrick W. Galbraith (2014: 5–6) emphasizes that moe is a verb, in that it is something that is performed: moe is situated in the response from consumers, not the character themselves. Furthermore, while nearly anything can trigger the moe response – from material representations of a character in figurine or cosplay form, to the sound or voice of a seiyū (voice actor) – the response is not to the object, it is to the conceptual kyara in the background. To Galbraith (2009), the emergence of moe reflects the importance of fantasy in the contemporary Japanese space. Moe, in Galbraith's construction, is accessed as junsui na fantajī (pure fantasy), a space where fictional fantasy rules with 'characters and relationships removed from context, emptied of depth and positioned outside reality'. (2009: n. pag.) Pure fantasy is pure because it is unpolluted by material reality, and its power is heightened by the stripping of characters from narrative and interior complexity, leaving only the image to be consumed and communicated. This allows for multiple, contradictory visions of a character to exist simultaneously without perceived dissonance. A character such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*'s Rei Ayanami, who is totally de-sexualized in one context may be explored as a lover or wife in another, and it is 'precisely because these ranges in the moe spectrum were not explored in the original narrative that they are exposed as virtual possibilities of the fantasy form of the character' (Galbraith 2009: n.pag.). Connecting back to the conception of kyara, what emerges is that the moe character is not connected or bounded by ontological notions of narrative, but exists as pure image and site of imaginative play; the pleasure of the moe character is rooted in their fictionality, and therefore their infinite possibility.

Media critic and scholar Azuma (2009) further probes the question of what makes the moe character by contending that, rather than being understood as a whole being, moe characters are composed of moe elements, and that fans of anime focus heavily on the consumption of moe, rather than ideas of narrative, finding pleasure in the reading and re-articulation of moe elements. For Azuma, moe elements are signs which emerged through market practice and principles, and each element forms a category developed to stimulate particular responses and consumer interest; the characters circulating in anime media are an output generated from established elements, combined according to the marketing programme contained within each work (2009: 37–42). From this perspective, the success and proliferation of a given anime text depends less on its narrative value and original contribution to the broader media space, and more on the ability to deploy elements which evoke the moe response, and thereby sell a wider array of products connected to a moe character. Rather than narrative or world providing a fundamental order beneath the fragments, Azuma articulates that narrative has itself become a fragmentary commodity, in the same category as non-narrative objects such as figurines or stickers (2009: 39–41). What provides value to these commodities is no longer the access they give to a fantasy of grand narrative, but instead a non-narrative database of character components – the moe elements.

Such an approach to media would, on its surface, seem to posit a scenario in which powerful narratives are rendered meaningless, as narrative is now merely the vehicle through which character fragments are packaged. Yet despite the decline of grand narrative, Azuma notes that a cursory examination of how consumers respond to fictional works points to a desire for well-constructed narrative that emotionally moves them (2009: 74–75). Azuma points to this seemingly contradictory state as being one of the most clearly

revealing aspects of the nature of subjectivity as active agent in database consumption, arguing that notions of narrative depth have been replaced with the ability of a small narrative to construct an emotionally resonating set of moe elements. As such, important questions considered and unpacked in the exploration of grand narratives – such as the history of the world, or the science behind certain technologies – are now left unanswered, as they serve little purpose in communicating the emotional drama facilitated by the characters. This correlates with Motoko Tanaka's (2014) argument that contemporary Japanese fiction exhibits a decline in depictions of communities and societies in favour of a pure, intense focus on individual characters and their relationships. In summarizing his argument, Azuma states that even though dramatic works rose in popularity in the late 1990s, the consumer reaction to these works was not drawn from narrative depth or complexity, but rather the arrangement of the surface:

> Therefore, in most cases when they say 'it's deep' or they 'can cry', the otaku are merely making a judgment on the excellence in the combination of moe-elements. In this sense, the rising interest in drama that has occurred in the 1990s is not essentially different from the rising interest in cat ears and maid costumes. What is sought here is not the narrative dynamism of old, but a formula, without a worldview or a message, that effectively manipulates emotion.
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> (2009: 78–79)

The *Madoka Magica* brand provides a potent site for examining the articulation of these concepts, as it possesses a cast of cute female heroines, a dramatic anime series, and a wide range of kyara merchandise. Although Deborah Shamoon (2015) has connected the affective potential of the moe kyara to *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, her analysis remains focused purely on the articulation of kyara within the anime series. This is not unusual – nearly every research paper into the franchise has, to date, largely addressed the content of the anime series. For example, Cleto and Bahl (2016) analysed the series' labyrinthe setting design and how it connects to the characters identities, while Lien Fan Shen (2014) examined the depiction of the young female heroines within the series. However, as established above, *Madoka Magica* extends far beyond the scope of an anime series; the articulation of the brand, together with its kyara, is found across a diverse variety of textual forms. Forrest Greenwood (2015) does branch outward to examine the wider franchise, but ultimately connects the expansion of the franchise back to centralized vision of the anime series and its narrative. This fixation on the anime series evokes the critiques of Clements (2013: 177) and Lamarre (2009: x), who both point out that scholarship on Japanese popular culture tends to be focused on the anime or manga text specifically, rather than the surrounding media ecologies or the form of the medium itself. This narrowness of vision, Clements (2013: 177) suggests, may be in part due to the fact that the primary artefacts of media brands that manage to cross international cultural borders of translation are narrative texts, with the surrounding marketing practices – advertisements, merchandise, collaborations – remaining fixed to one location and time.

This is not to minimize the valuable contributions such analysis offers, but to highlight the gaps addressed in this analysis. Furthermore, it is important to establish that *Madoka Magica* broke from the standard media mix model

through its disruption of the historic growth and development pattern. The common practice in the media mix model, as noted by Joo, Denison and Furukawa (2013: 16–17), is for a source text, typically a manga, to cascade outward into a wider ecology of texts. This then generates both a tree-like, traceable history of a work – from manga to future adaption, as with *Astro Boy* – but also fixes ownership of an intellectual property in a concrete manner. In contrast, *Madoka Magica* did not simply begin as a manga that grew in popularity, but was an original anime text, one which was developed and funded by an assemblage of creatives and a production committee of companies who held stakes in the success of the property. Prior to the release of the anime series in January 2011, an intense pre-release marketing campaign built hype and attracted attention to the forthcoming series. This marketing campaign, and how it contributed to the later reception of the anime series, is where I begin to trace the history of the brand, and how it cultivated the particular forms of affect-consumption typical to the anime media mix.

FROM ORIGINS TO AIRING

My choice to trace the beginning of the *Madoka Magica* media brand to the materials circulating prior to the debut of the television anime series in January 2011 reflects the specific production and development framework that the series emerged from. Along with pre-release marketing and promotional campaigns, the conception of the brand which was circulated before the anime text provides a valuable point of analysis in assessing the initial growth of the brand. Indeed, the juxtaposition between the pre-release marketing and the anime series directly highlights how the *Madoka Magica* brand emphasized a distinction between character and narrative from the outset. During the short window between the first announcement of the anime series in September 2010 and its premiere in January 2011, a large number of feature articles and interviews were presented in Japanese anime hobby magazines in order to promote the series. Since *Madoka Magica* was not based upon any pre-existing media property, the pre-release marketing made in magazines offers an insight into how the anime series – and, by extension, the brand – was framed to consumers initially.

As outlined above, *Madoka Magica* did not follow the typical pattern of media mix production logic but was launched as an original anime series. Another key element of its production which diverges from the norm was the ownership of its intellectual property. Compared to the typically assumed strong relationship between author and text in manga-derived properties, *Madoka Magica* does not possess a single author. Rather, the creative credit for the brand's gensaku (original work) is instead assigned to the Magica Quartet, a group pseudonym that is officially credited as referring to three individuals – director Shinbō Akiyuki, writer Urobuchi Gen, and character designer Aoki Ume – and the animation studio Shaft (Mori 2013: 83). The brand is therefore, from the beginning, marked as belonging not to any one creator, but a pseudonymous entity, which controls the intellectual property together with the 'Madoka Partners' production committee, itself made of seven companies – including book publisher Hōbunsha, anime goods company Movic, and the broadcast company Mainichi Broadcast System. The production committee is a business model unusual outside Japan, where multiple companies with interests in the production, distribution, licensing or promotion of media form a collective group to exploit an intellectual property across multiple media

platforms (Joo et al. 2013: 14). The integration of multiple media platforms into the proliferation of a franchise thereby becomes the goal of the production committee, as diffusion across multiple media types takes advantage of each company's strengths and enables a synergetic cross-fertilization between texts. In effect, the production committee system assumes media mix distribution from the outset, and through dispersed investment allows companies to avoid unnecessary competition and collaboratively produce texts with the highest chance of succeeding in the Japanese media marketplace.

Without a pre-existing work to point to, early marketing for *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* instead emphasized this creative lineage contributing to the series. One of the earliest magazine features dedicated to the series, published in the October edition of *Megami Magazine*, prominently displayed the names and past projects of these contributors, but the producer being interviewed – Aniplex's Iwakami Atsuhiro – emphasized that they had worked together to create the series, without any single individual pointed to as being the dominant creative force (Megami Magazine 2010). Additionally, the interview clearly articulates that the goal was to draw on the magical girl genre, one of the cornerstones of Japanese animation, to create a new, original work. There was some connection to the genre within the team: Shinbō and Iwakami had previously collaborated on the anime adaptation of *Mahō shōjo ririkaru Nanoha (Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha)* (2004), a magical girl re-imagining of characters from the *Toraianguru Hāto* (*Triangle Heart*) erotic video game series. Aoki Ume, by contrast, was primarily known as the creator of comedy manga series *Hidamari sukecchi (Hidamari Sketch)*. Urobuchi Gen's profile as a writer, however, is marked by experience with darker texts than the general tone of the mahō shōjo genre, including work for the *Fate* franchise and an original visual novel, *Saya no uta (The Song of Saya)* (2009). In short, the creative backgrounds of the team pointed to both extensive experience in the Japanese media marketplace, while hinting that Aoki's cute design would be contrasted against the dark writing style of Urobuchi and experienced direction of Shinbō.

Such hints were the majority of what was offered to readers. Joo et al. note that the pre-release marketing for *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* 'inverted the usual transmedia franchising logic, when its producers withheld information during the build-up to the initial broadcasts' (2013: 17) Little to no information was provided as to what the narrative of the anime series would actually contain, with Iwakami refusing to provide details in his interview with *Megami Magazine* and claiming that since the series was not based on a pre-existing text, 'not knowing what the story will be about until it begins is the true charm' (Megami Magazine 2010: 115). In a later edition of *Megami Magazine*, Aoki Ume would reinforce this coyness around the content of the series, stating only that it would be 'an anime where middle school girls each try their best' (Megami Magazine 2011: 32–33). By limiting the amount of information available on the series in advance, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* was positioned as a surprise to potential consumers, who could not predict nor ascertain the narrative in advance. To watch the series as it aired, therefore, would be to experience something unusual in the anime media mix: a narrative that had never been available in any media format prior.

What the pre-release marketing did emphasize, however, was the moe potential of the brand's characters, and the early announcements focused on the designs and descriptions of four of the main characters, along with the connection between the series and the mahō shōjo genre. Urobuchi Gen, in the November edition of NewType, explained that even though it is an

action-genre magical girl series (such as *Lyrical Nanoha*), the magical girls of *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* had been designed to be cute and lovely (NewType 2010: 48–49). Descriptions and illustrations of the characters provided evoke Azuma's conception of contemporary anime characters as being constructed from moe elements which carry particular meanings for consumers. Madoka's twin ponytails, for instance, are explicitly stated by Aoki as being incorporated in her design to emphasize her innocent and kind nature, while her knee-high white socks present an overflowing sense of purity (Megami Magazine 2011: 32–33). The other characters are similarly described through isolated aspects of their design, such as their haircuts, chest size and school uniforms, as well as assumed demographic consumers for these elements. For example, Aoki comments that she hopes Madoka's pink, frilly, fairy tale-esque costume will appeal to female viewers, while at the same time placing repeated emphasis on the character Mami's large breasts and unusual use of guns as a primary weapon. There is no narrative, goal or deep interiority given here; instead, the cast of characters are imbued with their sense of life purely through the elements of design. Absent the context of narrative, the characters were presented to consumers purely through the limits of their iconic design, thereby positioning consumers to begin focusing in on the affective elements that these beautiful heroines had been constructed from.

A narrative context for these characters finally arrived in January 2011, when the first episode of *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* premiered in the late-night anime timeslot of 1:30 a.m., on Friday 14 January. For a viewer who had only previously been exposed to the characters through the still, narrativeless images of magazine promotions and website hype, the events depicted in the series itself would come as quite a shock. The series itself, as described above, presents a dark take on the established magical girl genre: the heroines, rather than seeing love conquer all and surviving every encounter, are progressively and brutally dispatched over the series' twelve episodes, with the ultimate conclusion offering some respite, but at a severe cost for the titular Madoka. Due to the focus of this article being on the character-narrative confluence across the *Madoka Magica* media mix, however, I leave prolonged analysis of the series' narrative to others, and interested readers should pursue any of the scholarly work I have mentioned above to seek further insight into the series. Instead, here I examine how the characters are positioned within the anime series to explicitly offer the potential for divergence from the presented narrative, and open the possibility for diverse range of future engagements.

Gyappu (gap) moe is a fruitful concept to consider here. This is an affective response evoked through the contrast between a character's expected personality or behaviour based on their appearance or representation in other texts (Ōunsha 2012: 154). Typically, this is seen in a contrast within a narrative – such as a typically cold character exposing their true feelings – but I extend its application to the series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* on a more totalizing level, as the contrast between the cast of cute, colourful heroines and a dark, traumatic narrative presents a perfect example of this gap. Deborah Shamoon points out that scene in episode 3 of the magical girl Mami having her head eaten by a monster is shocking, and caused a stir among fans, as the cute characters were now embedded in 'a darker, adult take on the childish genre […] [where] being a magical girl is not fun or glamorous' (2015: 98). Although beautiful fighting girls have long been a staple of anime media (see Saitō 2006), *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* marked the first instance where the image of the cute magical girl archetype had been so thoroughly interrogated and exposed

to its pre-existing limits. Following Shen's application of Foucauldian theories on transgression to anime pleasures (2007: 18–26), I hold that through the transgression of the historically assumed bounds of the mahō shōjo genre, the gap moe response is generated by *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. The gap between visual expectation and arrangement within the narrative evoked a strong response from consumers, contributing to the success of the series through its effective emotional manipulation.

This gap is consistently reinforced within the technical construction of the individual episodes of the series. As is common in anime, each episode of the series (save the finale) features an opening song and credit sequence. What makes the *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* opening special, however, is its explicit presentation of a divergent vision of the characters. In the opening sequence, Madoka is depicted transforming into a magical girl, laughing atop a building with her magical girl comrades, and imagining a number of scenarios she may find herself in as a magical girl. However, these sequences never occur within the narrative of the series itself. Here I see an extension of the idea that through the creation of fragments and inconsistencies, myriad potential engagements and expansion points are opened up for producer and consumer to draw on in their engagement with the brand's intellectual property (see Steinberg 2012: 180–82). Much as the absence of certain forms of expression in one text exposes the possibility of such expression in future (Galbraith 2009), the envisioning of a Madoka detached from the horrors of the series' narrative given in the opening both primes the gap response and suggests divergent contexts for her kyara.

Additionally, though time travel only emerges as a key narrative element towards the conclusion of the series, it also serves a key function in promoting the possibility of divergence. In the final three episodes, Homura is revealed to have been repeatedly travelling back in time, re-living the same month multiple times. Beyond presenting two different versions of the Homura kyara, with their own unique set of characteristic moe elements (glasses and pigtails on the past Homura, no glasses and flowing hair with a hairband on the current), time travel presented the possibility of endless divergent narratives which could potentially exist for the characters. In scenes depicting these alternate timelines, multiple variations of the colourful cast are depicted, including a magical girl Madoka, and monsters never previously seen in the series, further establishing expansions points. That Homura is the only character who experiences an awareness of these resets of time further establishes that adventures could be explored within any of these alternate timelines without impact on the events of the series. Although providing some further context for the events of the series, this sequence and the creation of a new universe at the end of the series leaves open the gaps and fragmentary possibilities for expansion of the *Madoka Magica* world outside the narrowness of a singular continuity of events – after all, any vision of the characters could simply take place outside the timeline of the anime series.

What *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* presented to consumers was, by some standards, deceptive masquerade, with a cute beginning transitioning to a dark, violent series of events. Yet it is this masquerade that exposes one of the key aspects of the series which contributed to the future expansion of the brand as a whole: the potential of the characters to exist in multiple, divergent states, and for these divergences to remain unified in their belonging to the media mix. By priming consumers in the pre-release marketing and initial episodes with the image of cute, innocent moe characters, and then

contrasting those characters against a dark backdrop – while simultaneously presenting the opportunity for divergence from this timeline of events – the anime series enabled the *Madoka Magica* media mix to expand outward in myriad directions.

DIVERGENCE AND PROLIFERATION

Between January 2011 and the time of writing, the media mix of *Madoka Magica* expanded to nearly every form of media possible. Much like the *Astro Boy* media mix, there is little time in the day when a fan needs to be separated from the magical kyara: beyond figurines, video games, apparel and stickers, devoted consumers can purchase *Madoka Magica* microwavable curry sachets, and cap the day by curling up with an officially produced Homura body pillow. The incongruity between these incarnations of the kyara are best understood through the moe framework Galbraith (2009) discusses: rather than seeing these as narratively embedded characters dissociated from context, what these commodities present is the flattened kyara, emptied of depth, and open to polymorphous pleasurable responses. The success of the anime series can be attributed to its effective use of contrast and skilful narrative to craft an engaging plotline, and that plotline opened up new possibilities for the kyara. Much like *Evangelion*'s Rei Ayanami, Madoka and her comrades are able to be detached by consumers from the singular narrative context of the anime series and experienced in a state of pure fantasy, propelled across the media mix by the emotional resonance of their assembled moe elements.

As analysing the full breadth of the *Madoka Magica* media mix is beyond the scope of a single paper, here I zoom in on one aspect of its commodities: manga. Compared to similar media mixes, where years can pass between the debut of a text and its adaptations or divergent narratives (see Steinberg 2012: 148), the proliferation of the *Madoka Magica* brand across multiple platforms began in earnest even prior to the complete airing of the televised anime series. Not only did the manga adaptation of the anime series simul-publish with the airing of the series, but ten days after the series premiere, on 24 January 2011, the first spin-off series, *Mahō shōjo Kazumi magika: The innocent malice* (hereafter *Kazumi Magica*) debuted in manga magazine *Manga Time Kirara Forward*. Setting the standard for the future spin-off manga, *Kazumi Magica* takes place in an entirely separate narrative context to the anime series: in a different city, with a different cast of characters, and a different timeline; the primary connecting factors to the anime are the mascot character Kyubey, and the broader concept of magical girls fighting monsters. By early 2013 – two years after the premiere of the anime series – the *Madoka Magica* media mix included some eighteen separate ongoing or completed manga serials, the majority of which were published in the brand's own dedicated manga magazine, *Manga Time Kirara Magica*. In addition, five anthology volumes had been published by this time, featuring short manga stories and yonkoma (four panel comedic comics) by artists from both professional and dōjin (informal producer) backgrounds.

Though some of these works had maintained a connection with the dramatic tone and theme of the anime series, a sizable majority positioned the kyara within totally different contexts. Comedies such as *Madoka engawa (Madoka's Veranda)* position the girls as siblings living under one roof, while *Mahō shōjobu Madoka magika (Magical Girl Club Madoka Magica)* places them in a world where monsters and magical girls peacefully coexist, so they start

a club at their junior high school. These works, compared to the apocalyptic narrative of the anime, present something closer to what Motoko Tanaka describes as nichijōkei – a slice of life genre which 'focuses on the completely closed circle of the beautiful school girl protagonists, and there is no contamination by Others' (2014: n.pag.). These works avoid confrontation or drama, and instead open an opportunity for consumers 'to observe these moe beauties in a voyeuristic way, and to possess them rather than to have love relationships with them, even imagined, vicarious ones' (Tanaka 2014: n.pag.). That these works also prominently feature the full cast of kyara being friendly together, regardless of their relationships or death in the anime series, further reinforces that divergences are not subject to the limitation of one text's world-setting. In settings absent risk or conflict, the consumer can take pleasure in consuming the moe kyara in a pure, uncontaminated space. These texts do not challenge or subvert the anime series, nor any other text, but explore the infinite possible articulations and desires that the kyara might be embedded within.

By 2019, some 24 manga series have been published under *Madoka Magica*'s official branding, the majority of which are comedies and gag manga, imagining the brand's kyara as kindergarten students, 30-something housewives, and employees of a bookstore. Steinberg (2012: 149) notes that such officially produced parody comics have become part of media mix practices, appealing to the sensibilities of a generation raised on the amateur engagements of dōjinshi (informally produced works). With *Madoka Magica*'s production of such work on a wide scale, within a regularly published, officially marked platform, we see the next stage of this production–consumption cycle, where the volume of content produced and mass distribution creates an everlasting, high-production value marketplace of divergent ideas. Unlike dōjinshi, however, these works are not produced on a small scale and outside formal economic markets, but under the control and direct economic benefit of the official rights holders. Thus, divergent engagement is not simply tolerated, but endorsed and co-opted by the official media mix producers; the world of the kyara is not closed or beyond grasp, but something to be shaped and moulded on an individual scale. Indeed, in an interview tied to the release of the third film, *Gekijōban mahō shōjo Madoka magika [shinpen] hangyaku no engawa (Madoka's Veranda Magi Madoka Magica the Movie: Rebellion)* (Shinbō, 2013), director Shinbō Akiyuki expressly stated that the world of *Madoka Magica* was not a closed narrative, but one open to myriad divergent visions:

> I think it's fine for creators other than us to make spin-off and past stories as derivative works. Mahō Shōjo Madoka Magika contains many gaps for expansion, and I very much want to see those made. There's no need for us to close those gaps. Instead, in order to expand the series, we decided to make a sequel.
>
> (Yodo and Kurosaki 2013: 13)

By expanding the world of *Madoka Magica*, new access points are opened for future creation. The emphasis placed on expansion rather than closure is important, here, as beyond adaptations and one manga – 2015's *Mahou shoujo Madoka magika Majūhen (Puella Magi Madoka Magica Wraith Edition)* – which takes place between the events of the films, the manga, video games and films take place in their own, specific timelines, separate from the events of any other. Even in cases where continuity would seem to be assured between texts,

such as the anime series, its two gekijōban (film version of an anime) films, and the third film which seemingly continues the plotline, there is a nebulous potential for divergence. In the same interview, Shinbō explained that from his perspective the anime series represents a complete text in itself, and does not continue, but the two films adapted from the series do continue into the third (Yodo and Kurosaki 2013: 12–13). Here we see something slightly different from maintaining control through the prevention of consumers grasping the totality: Shinbō, as a member of the Magica Quartet, instead encourages divergent engagement with the media mix from consumers, and leaves open the possibility for any reading and reinterpretation of the mix to be a valid reflection of its elements. The totality cannot be grasped simply because it is fluid and amorphous, the kyara solidifying into discrete works which can be imagined and expanded upon at an individual level. Of course, a consumer may choose to interpret certain works as being the one true version of events, but this is left to the consumer themselves to determine; once again, the opening of gaps and inconsistencies allows for a wider range of engagement.

Thus, the role of the Magica Quartet as creators of the brand becomes more about conceptual ownership and unifying force than a specific and singular vision. Every manga within the media mix bears the mark of the Magica Quartet as the source of the gensaku or gen'an (original plan), credited equally alongside the creator of the specific manga work. This is regardless of the origins of the manga, which are as divergent as their contents; some, such as the afore-mentioned *Kazumi Magica*, began production prior to the release of the anime series, while others such as *Mami Tomoe no heibonna nichijō (Mami Tomoe's Everyday Life)* were originally published within the informal dōjinshi market and, later, became licensed properties of the brand. By incorporating myriad potential visions within the formal media economy, the brand has directed the desire of consumers towards officially produced products, rather than the secondary support of the informal fan economy. If there is one key driving force behind the *Madoka Magica* media mix, it is the opening of as many potential access points as possible, and incorporating those access points within their own interlinked media ecosystem.

The current state of the *Madoka Magica* media mix is primarily centred on one particular property within the media mix: *Mahō shōjo Madoka magika gaiden magia rekōdo (Puella Magi Madoka Magica Side-Story Magia Record)*, a mobile phone game launched in 2017. Like other expansions to the brand, *Magia Record* takes place in a new city, with a new set of rules surrounding monsters and magical power. This structure thereby continues the established aspect of the media mix where information about the world-setting will radically shift between each text, yet such information only impacts the individual narrative. Perhaps more importantly, the game introduces over fifty new magical girl kyara to the brand, each reflecting a new arrangement of moe elements that were otherwise unarticulated within the mix thus far, and thereby expanding the affect-potential of the brand. Cross-pollination also plays a significant factor here, with characters from other media brands making appearances as magical girl warriors in the game, potentially incentivising other fanbases to begin their engagement with the *Madoka Magica* media mix. With *Magia Record* slated to have an anime adaptation in January 2020, it seems that the future of the brand is secure for the time being, as it continues to expand, diversify and open potentials across platforms.

CONCLUSION: MARKETING *MADOKA MAGICA*

The ongoing proliferation of the *Madoka Magica* media mix highlights the centrality of the immaterial kyara and their constituent worlds to the contemporary anime media mix. Yet it also presents a tangible distinction between the concept of a world as consistent logical narrative-place, and the world of the character brand, connected entirely through the affective power of the kyara. There is a tangible relative lower importance given to propagating the darker narrative in *Madoka Magica* compared to opening vast arrays of potential kyara interpretations. The intensified mobility of the character image found in the media mix, following Steinberg's conception, has further intensified in both rapidity and breadth of divergence. It is fair to say, as Forrest Greenwood (2015: 204–05) does, that the producers of the *Madoka Magica* franchise disperse narratively displaced, decontextualized character images, detached from the anime series they first appeared in. However, by suggesting that the narrative of the original series 'accounts for the fungibility of these potential futures [and] gains awareness of every future that may potentially transpire' (Greenwood 2015: 205) is to position the narrative of the anime series as the central, dominant understanding of *Madoka Magica*. All other incarnations, in this light, become inherently connected (and observed) by the singular, perpetual character of Madoka; she is given a narrative centrality that supersedes any other incarnation, for she is always-already singular in the grand narrative of the franchise. Such an interpretation is valid, of course, from the perspective of an individual subjectivity, but that is exactly what I believe the *Madoka Magica* media mix encourages in its consumers: the creation of multiple individual understandings, all existing in parallel simultaneity, none privileged above any other.

That being said, there are limits to what the brand is willing to expand into. Particularly noticeable is the absence of erotic, or explicitly pornographic content; that remains the territory of the dōjin market. This is not to say, however, that material emerging from erotic character-potential is entirely forbidden. The manga *Mami Tomoe's Everyday Life*, one of the most popular of the brand's serialized manga, was originally a dōjinshi by the artist 'Aratamai' titled *Mami Tomoe 17 nengo (Mami Tomoe 17 Years Later)*, and in that incarnation featured nude depictions of the title character. When the manga was officially licensed and re-produced, however, these depictions were removed. Much as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* saw a similar distinction between the varieties of erotic potentials in fan products compared to the originals (see Galbraith 2009), limits exist in what can be articulated within the formal media economy, even if they are broadly unspoken; access to certain pleasures remains within the informal media economy of fans.

My goal here has been to highlight the importance of looking beyond the scope of a single text when assessing works within contemporary Japanese popular culture. Although close readings remain a valuable interpretative tool in the analysis of anime and its surrounding media, a brand such as *Madoka Magica* is best considered as a network of texts outside linear values and meanings, connected by the power of the kyara-affect. This is not to diminish the importance of the anime series, for the gaps it opened in both character and narrative have been essential to the brand's success. The focus on the narrative of the anime series found in Anglophone scholarship may be attributed on some level to the absence of many of these spin-off texts from local markets and accessibility; without English-language translations, many

of the manga may be overlooked for what they provide to the media mix over-all. Furthermore, the limited range of manga distributed internationally may cascade this focus. At time of writing, only a scant half of the manga have been officially translated into English, and those translated are predominately the dramatic type, with only one of the comedic serials translated. It would appear that, in the eyes of international distributors, there is no significant market for the vast array of comedies available in Japan. Though I cannot make firm conclusions, it seems reasonable to infer that a focus on *Madoka Magica* primarily as a dark, traumatic narrative may be bound up in the overall proliferation of the brand internationally.

Whether she is facing an apocalyptic struggle, serving drinks in a magical girl cafe, or promoting the variety of goods available at your local Lawson convenience store, Madoka remains Madoka, reflecting an immaterial kyara more powerful than any narratively bound incarnation. Individual consumers may connect texts to form their own vision of the true version of events, but this form of consumption is neither openly supported nor impugned upon by the intellectual property rights holders, who benefit from such open-access approaches to the franchise's products. There is no one aspect of *Madoka Magica* which can be pointed to as the true heart and meaning of the franchise as a whole. Instead, there is a multiplicity of *Madoka Magica* understandings and arrangements, each providing their own form of access to the franchise's elements. To understand *Madoka Magica* through anime series alone provides only part of the picture, for it is in the media mix and its myriad divergent visions that we can witness the driving forces beneath character marketing in contemporary Japan.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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