EJEN ALI AND WORLDBUILDING: THE CASE OF TRANSMEDIA PRODUCTION IN MALAYSIAN ANIMATION INDUSTRY

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EJEN ALI AND WORLDBUILDING: THE CASE OF TRANSMEDIA PRODUCTION IN MALAYSIAN ANIMATION INDUSTRY

ABSTRACT

This study examines *Ejen Ali* franchise, a prominent Malaysian animation series, through the lens of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding theories. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, this research delves into how Wau Animation, the franchise's primary producer, orchestrates content across various media formats to extend the narrative universe of *Ejen Ali*. The study investigates the integration of diverse media platforms in narrative construction and the practical strategies employed by the production team to align theoretical frameworks with actual production practices. By focusing on the interplay between transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding, this research highlights the mechanisms through which *Ejen Ali*'s storyworld is constructed and expanded. Furthermore, it situates these findings within the broader context of the Malaysian animation industry, offering insights into local practices and their contribution to the global understanding of transmedia narratives. Through interviews and content analysis, this study illustrates the exploratory and collaborative nature of worldbuilding implemented by Wau Animation in the development of Ejen Ali franchise as transmedia content. The findings of this study not only map the transmedia features of *Ejen Ali* but also bridges the gap between academic theory and industry practice, enhancing the clarity and relevance of transmedia studies within a Malaysian context.

Keyword: *Ejen Ali*; Transmedia storytelling; Worldbuilding; Malaysian animation; Wau Animation; Media convergence;

EJEN ALI DAN PEMBANGUNAN DUNIA CERITA: KES PRODUKSI TRANSMEDIA DALAM INDUSTRI ANIMASI MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti Ejen Ali iaitu siri animasi Malaysia yang terkenal, melalui lensa teori penceritaan transmedia dan pembangunan dunia cerita. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kajian kes kualitatif. Penyelidikan ini juga mengkaji bagaimana Wau Animation, iaitu penerbit utama francais ini, mencipta dan menyusun kandungan merentasi pelbagai format media untuk memperluas alam naratif *Ejen Ali*. Seterusnya, kajian ini juga menyiasat integrasi pelbagai platform media dalam pembinaan naratif dan strategi praktikal yang digunakan oleh pasukan produksi untuk menyelaraskan kerangka teori dengan amalan produksi sebenar. Dengan menumpukan kepada interaksi antara penceritaan transmedia dan pembangunan dunia cerita, penyelidikan ini juga menyiasat mekanisme dunia cerita *Ejen Ali* dibina dan diperluas. Selain itu, hasil kajian ini diletakkan dalam konteks industri animasi Malaysia. Selain itu, ia menawarkan maklumat mengenai amalan penceritaan transmedia oleh syarikat tempatan dan sumbangannya kepada pemahaman global tentang naratif transmedia. Melalui temu bual dan analisis kandungan, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa strategi pembinaan dunia yang di buat oleh Wau Animation untuk francais Ejen Ali sebagai kandungan transmedia bersifat penerokaan dan kerjasama. Dapatan daripada kajian ini bukan sahaja menceritakan ciri-ciri *transmedia Ejen Ali* tetapi juga merapatkan jurang antara teori akademik dan amalan industri, meningkatkan kejelasan dan relevansi kajian transmedia dalam konteks Malaysia.

Kata Kunci: Ejen Ali; Penceritaan transmedia; Pembangunan dunia cerita; Animasi Malaysia; Wau Animation; Konvergensi media

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LIST OF SYMBOL AND ABBREVIATION

MPB: Media Prima Berhad

MPD: Media Prima Digital

RMG: Rev Media Group

MDEC: Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation

FINAS: National Development Film Corporation

DIKN or NCIP: Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara or National Creative Industry Policy

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

CBO: Chief Brand Officer

MCU: Marvel Cinematic Universe

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study examines *Ejen Ali* as a popular Malaysian animation franchise through the perspective of transmedia storytelling theory and its accompanying worldbuilding approach. In pursuit of that, it utilizes qualitative case study research method that explore and investigate the way Wau Animation, the primary producer of *Ejen Ali* franchise, deals with content production in multiple media format to expand the franchise at the same time crafting the building block of *Ejen Ali* storyworld. While this study will analyse the transmedia features of *Ejen Ali* in terms of its narrative construction involving diverse media platforms, it also engages with the production team to reconcile theoretical understanding and real-world practice. Ensuring clarity and relevance within transmedia studies, this research's investigation into transmedia and worldbuilding theory through the expansion of *Ejen Ali* franchise is contextualized within the Malaysian animation industry.

Further into the context, the case study on *Ejen Ali* is situated in a cultural shift on the consumption culture towards local animation works in Malaysia. Outlined further in chapter 2 of this thesis, local animation works in recent years have been gaining substantial attention and popularity in the local market especially in the film industry. Previous to this, animation films especially in the 90s and early 2000s, such as *Silat Lagenda* (1998), *Putih* (2001), *Cheritera* (2001), and *Budak Lapok* (2007) suffered devastating loss during their premiering despite some works costing substantial investment and involve well known celebrities (Budiey, 2007; K. Ibrahim, 2001; Misfar, 1998; Noob, 2015; Safar, 2018). However, the advent of new generation of local animation like *Upin dan Ipin*, *BoBoiBoy*, and *Ejen Ali* have change the local landscape upon which animation works are popular and competitive compared to other local films in Malaysia. Argued in chapter 2, this significant change warrant investigation into the new wave of Malaysian-made animation works.

The major factor that propels this new wave of local animation is their adoption of multiple media format, specifically, the exploitation of intellectual property usage of the animated works by proliferating its portrayal/depiction beyond animation format. Instead of producing animation as a single work, this new wave of local producers seems to invest in treating animation as a franchise. I made the argument, later in chapter 3, that transmedia storytelling as a theory is equipped with comprehensive frameworks to visit this phenomenon of adopting multiple media format. As a concept, transmedia storytelling acknowledges the functional utility of adopting several media formats to expand a franchise. It is a practical way to reach and obtain new audiences from varying media-based markets.

> "Different media attract different market niches. Films and television probably have the most diverse audiences, comics and games the narrowest. A good transmedia franchise works to attract multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 96)

Therefore, investing in varying format for a franchise is an economic decision, one that ensures survivability of producer operated in a competitive narrative entertainment industry.

Additionally, transmedia storytelling also pays attention to the construction of diversifying narratives as a subset of a franchise considering that each of these narratives will be produced/published in differing format. Rather than exclusively treating the adoption of multiple formats as an economic phenomenon, transmedia storytelling through its worldbuilding counterparts appreciate the aesthetics of crafting stories across platforms and tend to see this multi-platform adoption as a cultural phenomenon as well. Straying away from adaptation theory that commends repetitive story structure,

transmedia storytelling promotes works that extend the stories further as the franchise grows giving new information and new experiences for its audiences.

> "Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. Redundancy burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail. Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 96).

With the appreciation of the aesthetics part of the franchise, an accompanying worldbuilding concept highlights the construction of the fictional universe that sustain several interconnected and cohesive storylines that make up unified narrative within the franchise.

The choice to focus entirely on *Ejen Ali* is based practicality and confidence over the realism of this case study project. Previous studies on transmedia cases, often relying into one case at a time (See. Brindley, 2019; Jenkins, 2006; Long, 2007; Menard, 2015; Richter, 2016). In his book, *Convergence Culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins use a single case of *The Matrix* franchise to illustrate that transmedia storytelling consists of several aspects including synergic storytelling, collaborative authorship, art of world-making, and additive comprehension. I argue that this is the case because of the nature of transmedia studies that delve deeper into the narrative structures of multiple storylines across varying platform to find insight into how these works bounded by a single franchise can be cohesive and coherence with one another. This would mean that having more cases means that more analysis has to be done which would potentially affect the realism of a study given limited time resources.

Additionally, the choice of *Ejen Ali* over other animation works that adopt multiple media format is heavily discussed in section 4.2 (Choosing *Ejen Ali* as the case for this study). Ultimately, the decision to adopt *Ejen Ali* franchise for this case study hinges upon its popularity in the local animation market, its transmedia features and data

accessibility. It is also important to note that case study research is not built for statistical generalization as argued by case study scholars such as Robert K. Yin (2017) and Robert E. Stakes (1995). Therefore, it is not the purpose of this study to prove *Ejen Ali* is a case of transmedia narrative and/or to present generalizable approach of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding practice among local animation producers.

Rather, this study intends to utilize the current comprehension over transmedia and worldbuilding theory to examine *Ejen Ali* franchise and its adoption of various media platforms. Recommended by Yin (2017) and Stake (1995), a theoretical proposition is established to formulate research objectives (RO) and research questions (RQ) for this thesis. Subsequently, the scope of the research is identified to ensure relevance in data analysis part of the study. This theoretical proposition, RO & RQ, and research scope are discussed at length in section 4.3 and 4.4 of the methodology section. Agreeing with Stake (1995), the strength of a case study relied on the interpretation of the phenomenon. With that, through this case study method, this analysis aspect of this research will attempt to reach analytical generalizations upon which the findings of this case study are generalizable to the pre-formulated theoretical proposition.

Solidifying the analysis part is my interpretation over transmedia and worldbuilding approaches presented in the expansion of *Ejen Ali* franchise which are presented in thematic structure towards the end of this research. These interpretations serve to provide further insight into the theory of transmedia storytelling and its accompanying worldbuilding grounded by the context of the Malaysian animation industry. While remaining true to the theoretical proposition, the analysis aspect of this theses will illustrate the strategic and practical implementation of transmedia and worldbuilding in *Ejen Ali* franchise that may extend and/or challenge current scholarships of the theory. This research will showcase the versatility of transmedia and worldbuilding

approaches in the expansion of animation content, particularly, *Ejen Ali* franchise within the Malaysian animation industry.

1.1   Malaysian animation and transmedia studies

Within the domain of academic and scholarly research, Malaysian animation has become a focal point of investigation over the past two decades with researchers delving into various facets of this emergent industry. Notably, scholars like Hassan Muthalib (2013, 2007) and John Lent (2003) have laid the foundation for understanding the development of the animation sector in Malaysia. Their contributions shed light on the industry's role as a governmental tool, strategically employed to counter the influx of foreign content in Malaysian locales. Muthalib and Lent contend that fostering Malaysian-owned content offers a unique opportunity for the promotion of local culture and values among the public (Lent, 2003; Muthalib, 2007, 2013). Subsequently, Mohd Khalis, Mustaffa, Shahizan Ali, and Mohamed Salim (2019) further this documentation by examining the evolution of cartoon development in print media, and argue that this cartoon, although it is physically drawn on print medium is the backbone of animated works in Malaysia.

Muthalib's (2013) also explore the aesthetic elements within local animation content and illuminate influence of foreign paradigms, particularly from Hollywood and Japanese animation, on the portrayal of characters developed by Malaysian producers. Rafik, Alimom, and Firdaus (2020) corroborate this finding, delving into the phenomenon of cultural imperialism in Malaysian animation. Their research illustrates how the global success of American animation has established it as a benchmark in the animation world, leading Malaysian animation to follow a similar trajectory. Consequently, there is a concerning tendency for local animation to assimilate Western values, potentially jeopardizing its unique identity in portraying local values and culture. Contrary to the assimilation argument, other scholars challenge this perspective, emphasizing the existence of animation works that strongly convey a sense of local

identity. Works by Khalis and Mustaffa (2017), Khalis, Mustaffa, and Ali (2016), N. Y. M. Nasir, Hashim, and Pawi (2022), and Omar and Ishak (2017) highlight animations that authentically depict local languages, traditional attire, and cultural references, preserving the essence of Malaysian identity.

Expanding the discourse beyond cultural representation, researchers like M. S. Abu Bakar, Kamisan, Abdul Adzis, Haris, and Shuki (2020) scrutinize the challenges in the distribution aspects of local animation works. Their qualitative research posits that the struggles faced by the local film industry in the late 90s and early 2000s can be attributed to the expensive nature of animation production and distribution, both domestically and internationally, coupled with a narrow market catering primarily to children and young audiences. Taking different perspectives, another research have showcased that the distribution challenges and the need for advocacy on Malaysian culture and identity are effectively addressed by some producers in the Malaysian animation industry, particularly those that include the adoption of multiple media formats to expand their animation franchise (Mohd Hasri, Md Syed, & Runnel, 2022).

Works such as *Upin dan Ipin*, *BoBoiBoy*, and *Ejen Ali* stand as exemplars, embodying a paradigm that includes the adoption of multiple media formats to expand their animation franchise (Mohd Hasri, Md Syed, & Runnel, 2022). The success of these productions within the local media sector is indisputable. Recognizing the untapped potential, J. Aziz, Mustaffa, and Hamzah (2021) advocate for the incorporation of a transmedia storytelling paradigm into local cultural works, particularly within the film sector. This strategic shift, they argue, holds the promise of further enriching the landscape of Malaysian animation, positioning it as a powerful vehicle for cultural expression and global recognition.

Although transmedia storytelling seems to be lucrative, practical, and highly functional to strengthen industrial relevance for cultural works as discussed by several prominent scholars (see. Boni, 2017; Brindley, 2019; Guynes & Hassler-Forest, 2018; Jenkins, 2004; Jenkins, 2006, 2011), its exploration in the Malaysian settings tend to focus education, tourism, and marketing. Santano and Thwaites (2018) have delved into transmedia storytelling in Malaysia, with a specific focus on augmented reality (AR) technology. Their study emphasizes the use of AR for documenting and showcasing museum artifact pertaining to Malaysian culture and history. In a similar vein, Fehér (2015) explores transmedia storytelling in the Malaysian context through a case study involving the use of camera drones in a promotional campaign by 100Plus, a sports drink manufacturer. Fehér (2015) posits that that the transmedia-based promotion primarily aimed at brand exposure. In the educational realm, Berezina (2020) and Perry (2020) have conducted research on the use of transmedia storytelling techniques in higher education. These studies highlight the pedagogical applications of transmedia storytelling in fostering innovative approaches within academic institutions.

However, recent research on transmedia storytelling in the Malaysian setting has begun to extend its focus to cultural studies, particularly within the creative culture industry, including animation and film. Mohd Hasri et al. (2022) review the adoption of transmedia storytelling among animation producers, aiming to maintain competitiveness while preserving the cultural role of animation in advocating and promoting local culture to domestic and international audiences. Further narrowing the scope, another two studies have been conducted to investigate transmedia practices employed in the *BoBoiBoy* animation, illustrating the role of worldbuilding and intertextuality in crafting a cohesive transmedia experience for this animation (Hasri & Md Syed, 2021; Mohd Hasri & Md Syed, 2021).

Taking different approach, Tazijan, Mat, Rusli, and Ramli (2023) conduct a consumer study on Malaysian university student framed as Generation Z, exploring their behavior in consuming transmedia content. Their findings reveal diverse preferences among Generation Z in Malaysia, aligning with Jenkins' (2006) assertion that audiences in the convergence age exhibit diverse preferences in choosing media formats to consume content. Transmedia storytelling's strength lies in its ability to cater to these diverse preferences, offering a choice to consume content on a single platform or across multiple platforms. Each instalment within a transmedia narrative should stand alone yet contribute to the unified narrative, enabling audiences to enjoy interconnected storylines for a richer entertainment experience.

As the body of research on transmedia storytelling in Malaysia continues to expand, it becomes increasingly apparent that there exists a considerable space yet to be explored within the realm of transmedia storytelling theory in the Malaysian context. The inherent versatility of this theoretical framework within cultural works provides a canvas for multifaceted interpretations regarding its role in shaping narratives that span diverse media formats. While existing studies have laid essential foundations, there remains a rich tapestry of uncharted territory waiting to be unraveled. This case study, positioned within this broader landscape, aspires not only to augment our current understanding but also to delve into unexplored nuances. By doing so, it seeks to foster a more profound comprehension of the intricacies surrounding transmedia storytelling specifically within the Malaysian milieu. In essence, this research endeavors to be a catalyst for stimulating intellectual discourse, igniting further curiosity among scholars, practitioners, and enthusiasts alike, ultimately inspiring and guiding future research endeavors into the captivating and dynamic realm of transmedia storytelling in the Malaysian context.

1.2   Problem statement

The contemporary landscape of the narrative entertainment industry in Malaysia is undergoing a significant transformation fueled by globalization and marked by heightened competition. Upon considering the survivability of animation works in Malaysia, this dichotomy poses a substantial challenge that necessitates meticulous investigation and strategic interventions to ensure the sustainable growth and relevance of the animation industry. This problem statement articulates the pressing issues at the heart of this research, emphasizing the urgency and significance of addressing these challenges.

Reports indicate a decline in film revenue despite an increase in production, and projections suggest a continued downward trajectory in the future. The industry's reliance on revenue as a key indicator underscores a concerning narrative of decline, raising questions about its sustainability and growth (Bakar, 2012; A. Razak, 2014;). The decline in revenue is speculated to be linked to a loss of faith among consumers in the capabilities of local filmmaking (Hauzah, 2023). A mere 10 percent of the substantial RM 700 million revenue is allocated to local films, with the majority going to international productions from Korea, Japan, Hollywood, and Hong Kong. Despite a promising overall performance in 2016, many local films struggle to attract Malaysian consumers, compounding the challenges faced by the industry (MyMetro, 2017). For those producers and publishers incurring losses, the impact is more severe, leading to a halt in new film production and placing heightened pressure on the industry's workforce. This trend is seen as deviating from the government's envisioned trajectory for the national film industry, signaling a need for comprehensive strategies to address these challenges (Ismail, 2015).

One of the principal issues plaguing the narrative entertainment industry in Malaysia is the escalating levels of competition (Hauzah, 2023; Jaafar, 2023; Bernama, 2024). The surge in the number of content creators, production houses, and distribution

platforms has led to an oversaturated market, intensifying the battle for audience attention and market share. Noteworthy is the emergence of diverse narrative formats, including films, television series, digital content, and interactive experiences, each vying for prominence in an environment characterized by a voracious appetite for engaging storytelling. This heightened competition not only places strain on existing industry players but also poses barriers for new entrants seeking to carve a niche.

The fierce competition is exacerbated by the globalization of the entertainment industry, with international content easily accessible to Malaysian audiences (Hauzah, 2023). Foreign productions, often backed by substantial budgets and extensive marketing campaigns, create a formidable challenge for local narratives striving to captivate viewers. Consequently, Malaysian storytellers face the imperative of not only producing compelling content but also strategically positioning it within an intensely competitive global landscape (Bernama, 2024). Specific to the animation industry, M. S. Abu Bakar et al. (2020) argue that the survivability of animation works is concerning due to challenges in the market such as high production cost and the surge to highly invested foreign animation to the Malaysian market. Competing with those animation particularly from the Hollywood and Japanese requires Malaysian producer to create unique proposition for their product.

The advent of digital platforms also means that animation producers need to engage with differing media formats to expand the reach of their cultural works. Therefore, sufficient understanding and comprehension over the utility of multiple media format is needed to minimize risk. Theories such as transmedia storytelling might offer solutions to this concern. As mentioned previously, it has been recommended by the local academic community for the local industry player particularly those in film sector to adopt transmedia storytelling approach (J. Aziz et al., 2021). However, research on the transmedia storytelling theory within the Malaysian narrative entertainment industry is

quite limited with only a couple of case studies has been done. Transmedia storytelling, a narrative strategy that unfolds across multiple media platforms, has proven to be a powerful tool for engaging audiences, enhancing narrative depth, and expanding storytelling possibilities. However, the industry in Malaysia lacks a comprehensive understanding of this theory, resulting in a missed opportunity to leverage its potential.

The absence of a nuanced understanding of transmedia storytelling theory hampers the industry's ability to create cohesive and immersive storytelling experiences that transcend traditional boundaries. Malaysian content creators often struggle to navigate the complexities of transmedia storytelling, leading to missed opportunities for audience engagement and revenue generation. Additionally, the lack of a standardized framework for integrating transmedia elements into narrative content contributes to inconsistencies in execution and limits the overall impact of storytelling endeavors.

The aforementioned challenges have created a compounding effect on the narrative entertainment industry in Malaysia particularly on animation sector. High competition necessitates innovative and differentiated approaches to storytelling, making a profound understanding of transmedia storytelling theory imperative. Conversely, the lack of transmedia literacy hinders the industry's capacity to stand out in the competitive landscape, resulting in a cycle that perpetuates challenges and inhibits holistic industry growth. In light of these issues, this thesis seeks to delve into the adoption of multiple media format and the employment transmedia storytelling theory in Malaysia. By looking at a case study on *Ejen Ali,* a successful media franchise spanning across multiple media format, this research aims to provide actionable insights, frameworks, and recommendations that can empower industry stakeholders to navigate the competitive landscape strategically and harness the potential of transmedia storytelling for sustainable growth and innovation.

1.3   Case study on *Ejen Ali* franchise

Ejen Ali animation franchise span over several media platforms including TV series, blockbuster films, comic book, card games and mobile games. Its TV series instalments is currently spanning for three seasons (Chaw, 2019; Gun, 2016; Zahar, 2022). *Ejen Ali* as an animation franchise is relatively new and young compare to *Upin & Ipin,* and *BoBoiBoy* with only one film, *Ejen Ali: The Movie* which premiered on 28 November 2019 (Chaw, 2019). *Ejen Ali* is essentially a story that centered around the main character, Ali who manages to obtain a military-grade device called I.R.I.S (Infinity Retinal Intelligence System) that gives him superhero ability. Having this technology, Ali is recruited to a spy agency to fight villain.

Ejen Ali is quite unique and very competitive compared to the other animation franchises. This is because, although it is newer on the market, *Ejen Ali* as a franchise does not fall behind and still continue to thrive even better than the rest. The TV series is a hit both locally and internationally, especially in Indonesia (Bernama, 2018). The only film within the franchise thus far, *Ejen Ali: The Movie*, managed to be Malaysia's top-grossing local movie in 2019 beating the other two competing film which are *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* and *BoBoiBoy: The Movie 2*. *Ejen Ali: The Movie* had collected a whopping RM 30 million in just 6 weeks with only RM 5.5 million allocated production cost (Bernama, 2018; Malaymail, 2020; Shim, 2020). The franchise also piloted a mobile game which was launched of March 2016. The game successfully received 260,000 downloads within 3 month after launching (Singh, 2016).

Another aspect that makes *Ejen Ali* unique and worth to be studied is that it is the first animation in which its intellectual property is owned by a media conglomerate known as Media Prima Berhad (Gun, 2016). Specifically, *Ejen Ali* is a collaboration between local animation producer, Wau Animation and Primeworks Studio. Primeworks Studio is a media company under the umbrella of Media Prima Berhad that deals with every aspect

of the media chain including TV and film production, content sales, film distribution and marketing, animation, talent management as well as licensing and merchandising solutions (MediaPrima). Due to Media Prima's involvement into various forms of media format and platform, their project into storytelling business revolving around animation industry, should in theory, resemble the phenomenon of media convergence. The size of this media conglomerate should be sufficient to indicate that there are some forms of media convergence strategies at work.

The fact that their product, although a bit younger, manage to beat an existing established animation franchise (at least in terms of grossing revenue for blockbuster film) might suggest that resources and network does matter when it comes to competition in the animated storytelling business relating to media convergence and transmedia storytelling. Research over *Ejen Ali* are frequently gravitate towards the cultural ideology and aesthetics (M. R. Arshad, Yoon, & Manaf, 2018; M. R. B. Arshad & Kim). As for that, examining the franchise through the lens of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding will lead to the understanding on how this phenomenon works in Malaysia's mediascape and the practicality of employing the strategies as a means of prevailing in narrative entertainment business.

1.4 Research aim and scope

The aim of this study is to examine *Ejen Ali* franchise through the perspective of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding. The central aspect of this investigation as case study research is to interpret the adoption of multiple media platforms for *Ejen Ali* franchise as transmedia phenomenon. Additionally, this case study seeks to find substantial evidence to generate analytical generalization over Wau Animation's deployment of transmedia and worldbuilding techniques for the expansion of *Ejen Ali* franchise. This would mean that, with the pursuit to investigate *Ejen Ali* franchise as a case of transmedia storytelling guided by theoretical proposition (discussed in section

4.3), this study also wants to explore further insight into the structure and nuances of this transmedia phenomenon alongside with its worldbuilding feature when grounded in the context of Malaysian animation industry at the same time reconcile with the production team on their perspective about the transmedia nature of their content.

Illustrated in chapter 3, transmedia storytelling can be examined through analyzing its worldbuilding features. This is because worldbuilding recognizes the importance of building a fictional storyworld that is comprehensive enough to support multiple storylines that can exist in various formats. Worldbuilding ensure multiple storylines and/or portrayals of the transmedia storyworld, although interconnected, are cohesive, coherent, consistent from one another. Ekman and Taylor (2016) asserts that analyzing worldbuilding on a set of transmedia narrative can be done in three perspectives. The first perspective referred to as readerly worldbuilding, acknowledges that worldbuilding is a mental process constructed by the viewer/audience of a transmedia narrative; thus, inquiries into worldbuilding through this perspective require some form of audience study.

The second perspective, also called authorial worldbuilding recognizes the author as the source of the transmedia universe. Therefore, examining worldbuilding through this perspective requires the researcher to engage with the author and seek they the storyworld is constructed. Different from readerly and authorial worldbuilding that treat this practice as a mental process, analytical worldbuilding put more emphasis on the content itself and priorities on discovering how worldbuilding element is strategically portrayed across varying format. This approach pays attention to what has been embedded in published or produced storylines rather than what might be in the future. Having to include all perspectives into one study, perhaps, provides a clear pathway from the creation of storyworld by the author, how it is presented in several texts, and how audience make sense of the storyworld.

However, such endeavor will cost substantial resources as the research have to engage with production, examine with the text, and perform audience study knowing that each process involves different kinds of data even done qualitatively. Therefore, my case study research will narrow the scope of this study to only dealing with the text and reconcile the findings with the production team. Because of this, I am excluding audience study from this investigation to ensure the realism of this project as well as its practicality. Having reconciled both of these perspectives will also ensure the relevance of the case study research as the interpretation from the second perspective will be blended with the production team perception over the subject matter. With the scope established, I am proceeding to formulate theoretical proposition, research objective (RO) and research question (RQ).

1.5   Overview of research objectives and research questions

This case study adopted a theoretical proposition constructed based on literature review outlined in chapter 3. The theoretical proposition, which will be discussed again in methodology chapter, is formulated as follow: -

A transmedia narrative should **encompass a set of standalone texts and cultural artifacts that exist in diverse media platforms**. Equipped with worldbuilding, **each subset of a transmedia narrative should contain a reference** (in the form of worldbuilding element) on each other **creating interconnectedness between varying storylines, plots, depictions and portrayal**. While each part can be consumed individually without pre-consuming the other, the references established through worldbuilding will **ensure cohesive and immersive entertainment experience.**

Accompanying above theoretical proposition is the research objectives and research questions which are formulated as follows:

Research Objectives

1. To explore the adoption of multiple media formats for the expansion of *Ejen Ali* franchise in the Malaysian animation industry

2. To examine the portrayal of worldbuilding element embedded within the *Ejen Ali* franchise.

3. To analyze the production strategy of developing *Ejen Ali* franchise as transmedia narrative.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does *Ejen Ali* franchise incorporate variety of media format to convey its content?

2. How do worldbuilding elements are showcased in the construction of content for *Ejen Ali* franchise?

3. How does Wau Animation approach the production of *Ejen Ali* franchise as a transmedia narrative?

This section provides a brief overview of the research objectives and research questions. For a more detailed explanation and in-depth discussion, refer to Section 4.4 of the methodology chapter. Section 4.4 offers a comprehensive exploration of the research objectives and questions, along with the methodologies employed to address them.

1.6   Significance of the study

This case study research is expected to contribute by addressing scholarly gap within the field of transmedia storytelling studies. While transmedia storytelling theory have been rapidly explored in the past several decades, the research into this theory within the context of Malaysia as well as its animation industry is limited. As mentioned before, transmedia studies in Malaysia, initially, seems to revolve around education, tourism and marketing (see. Berezina, 2020; Fehér, 2015; Perry, 2020; Santano & Thwaites, 2018). Upon the increased popularity of animation works in narrative entertainment industry,

one study have pointed out that transmedia storytelling serve as vehicle for animation producer to be more competitive in the market at the same time promoting local culture and value (Mohd Hasri et al., 2022).

Additionally, another study emerge on similar note but tend to focus more on other popular animation work, *BoBoiBoy* as case of transmedia storytelling (Hasri & Md Syed, 2021). However, this study only focuses on the perspectives of analytical worldbuilding whereby most of the research attention goes to analysing transmedia text and they portrayal of storyworld as it is depicted in published or produced works. This is a normal endeavour as examining the interconnected text can be a plausible way to understand the practicality and lucrativeness of transmedia storytelling. This is because numerous global research on transmedia storytelling tends to approach to analyse this theory using this paradigm. Jenkins (2006) use *The Matrix* franchise to discuss the art of world-making and its contribution in making transmedia works cohesive despite having to be produced in varying platforms.

Following suit on the study of transmedia, Long (2008) commit to examine Jim Henson's intertwining films, *Labyrinth* (1986) and *The Dark Crystal* (1982) to make case that worldbuilding feature of transmedia storytelling motivate audience to jump between consuming one instalment to another to satisfy their need to make sense of the storyworld. In fact, various other research on popular transmedia case like Marvel Cinematic Universe, Dr Who Universe, Star Wars Extended Universe, Harry Potter Wizarding World and The Lost Universe that focus exclusively on the analysis of the texts existed (see. Brindley, 2019; Guynes & Hassler-Forest, 2018; Menard, 2015; Proctor, 2014; Richter, 2016). The sheer number of transmedia studies that focus on textual analysis creates a stark contrast when comparing to the number of transmedia studies that have some commentary into the transmedia author's point of view.

A book called *Star Wars and the history of transmedia storytelling* (2018) contains 15 chapters that discussed in detail about *Star Wars* as a subject of transmedia narrative. Among this, only a one chapter written by Tara Lomax focus on the perspective of George Lucas, the creator of the *Star Wars* franchise (Lomax, 2018). I tend to believe that the limited exposure on the producer's point of view in transmedia storytelling studies comes from challenging access to the production team especially when it comes to the empirical and scientific inquiry. While the transmedia texts are largely accessible because they are published/produced for public consumption, willingness from the production team to be engaged further in a scientific inquiry setting is an entirely different ball game. Upon her effort to obtain cooperation from production house that create *Transformer* franchise, Fast (2012, p. 114) supported my claim as she mentioned that "gaining access to company board rooms, especially within industry sector, is not an easy procedure".

This presents a gap in the field of transmedia studies as reconciliation between practical approaches of dispersing a set of stories to varying media format and the theoretical understanding of transmedia is limited. In the case of Tara Lomax mentioned in previous paragraphs, even in the same book, there is no comparison available between theoretical discussion of transmedia storytelling feature of *Star Wars* through textual analysis with George Lucas's practical approach in expanding the *Star Wars* franchise. This is because Lomax (2018) conducts her study independently from other studies in the same book although all chapters carry similar themes of treating *Star Wars* as a transmedia narrative. Important to note that Lomax (2018) rendition of authorial worldbuilding relied mostly on secondary sources.

Jenkins (2006) also attempts to provide well rounded analysis (that covers both analysis on the texts and authorial review) on *The Matrix* franchise as a case of transmedia stories in his book, *Convergence Culture.* He primarily refers to the *The Matrix* contents and storylines to illustrate the approach of worldbuilding and the purpose of additive

comprehension material in a transmedia story is used to provide more understanding about the storyworld. Additionally, Jenkins (2006) also include in a transcript of an online chat with Wachowski sisters to investigate their perspectives over the transmedia feature of *The Matrix* franchise. The result from this discussion helps Jenkins (2006) to formulate arguments on synergistic storytelling and collaborative authorship feature of transmedia storytelling production.

Another multi-approach study revolving a transmedia narrative that deal with both the transmedia texts as well as the key personnel directly involved with the growth of transmedia franchise has been conducted by Swedish researcher. Fast (2012) has structure her research to include her interpretation of *Transformer* franchise as a case of transmedia at the same time getting commentary from key individuals that are responsible for the growth of the franchise. Even though *Transformer* franchise is owned by Hasbro, Fast (2012) only obtained 1 individual from this company, specifically, in its Nordic office that employed as the marketing manager. The other 4 respondents are from other companies that are responsible for the marketing aspects of *Transformer* franchise.

Considering above discussion, my case study research on *Ejen Ali* franchise attempts to address the present gap by including an analysis through the perspective of both analytical worldbuilding that covers textual analysis of the transmedia texts and authorial worldbuilding that cover the conversation analysis resulting from the interview session with the production team. Different from Fast (2012), including authorial analysis is practical and realistic because Wau Animation as a company is not as big as Hasbro, a global supplier of children toys and enthusiast. Being able to reach Wau Animation and obtaining their willingness to participate in my interview helped a great deal. Importantly, by having both my critical interpretation over the structure of transmedia content in *Ejen Ali* franchise and reviews from the production team regarding the transmedia nature of

their intellectual property, this case study endeavour to provide a well-rounded analysis that cover the production company as well as the narrative structure of *Ejen Ali.*

This case study on the *Ejen Ali* franchise adopts the paradigm of transmedia storytelling to explore the complexities of narrative production and authorship within the Malaysian animation industry. As a media franchise that utilizes transmedia storytelling techniques, *Ejen Ali* provides a valuable case for examining how stories are extended and adapted across multiple platforms. The study's significance lies in its contribution to understanding the dynamics of transmedia storytelling in a localized context, while also adding to the broader discourse on popular culture.

Transmedia storytelling has become an essential area of research in contemporary media studies due to its close association with popular culture. As noted by Jenkins (2009), Schiller (2018), Bolin (2007), Von Stackelberg and Jones (2014), and Scolari (2009), transmedia storytelling often involves popular works and is inherently linked to popular culture. By examining how the *Ejen Ali* franchise navigates the challenges and opportunities of transmedia storytelling, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that investigates the impact of this storytelling model on the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural texts. The insights derived from this case study are particularly relevant given the increasing prevalence of transmedia practices in the global media landscape.

One of the key contributions of this study is its focus on the production process and authorship models within the *Ejen Ali* franchise. The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how transmedia storytelling is strategically employed to create a cohesive narrative universe that engages audiences across different media platforms. By analyzing the production strategies and authorship dynamics, the study sheds light on how creative and commercial decisions shape the development of transmedia franchises. As Scolari (2009) argues, the transmedia storytelling model is an

important source of popular culture, and findings from this study are expected to offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of content creation in a rapidly evolving media environment.

Furthermore, this study contributes to scholarly discourse by examining the role of transmedia storytelling in constructing and maintaining audience engagement. The *Ejen Ali* franchise's approach to narrative expansion across multiple platforms, such as television, film, comics, and video games, offers a unique perspective on how content creators respond to audience demand and participatory culture. This research underscores the significance of audience engagement in driving the popularity of transmedia franchises, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between producers and consumers in the creation of cultural texts. By exploring this dynamic, the study enhances our understanding of how media companies navigate the complexities of maintaining narrative continuity and coherence while catering to diverse audience preferences.

Finally, this case study on the *Ejen Ali* franchise emphasizes the importance of considering localized contexts in transmedia storytelling research. While much of the existing literature has focused on global media conglomerates and their transmedia strategies, this study provides a nuanced perspective by examining a successful transmedia franchise within the Malaysian animation industry. The findings are expected to illuminate how local cultural and industrial factors influence the adoption and adaptation of transmedia practices, thereby enriching the global discourse on transmedia storytelling and popular culture.

In conclusion, this study is significant for its contributions to the understanding of transmedia storytelling as a critical framework within popular culture. By focusing on the production processes, authorship models, and audience engagement strategies of the *Ejen Ali* franchise, the research offers valuable insights into the dynamics of narrative construction and consumption in a multi-platform environment. These findings are

anticipated to inform future research on transmedia storytelling and its impact on popular culture.

1.7 Thesis structure

The structure of this thesis is designed to navigate through the contextual, theoretical, and empirical dimensions of the study, providing a comprehensive examination of *Ejen Ali* as a case of transmedia narrative contextualized in the Malaysian animation industry. The journey commences with Chapter 2, which serves as the foundational context chapter. This section primary focus is the establishment and the industrial aspect of the Malaysian animation industry. It unfolds in three layers, each contributing to the study's contextual depth. Firstly, the historical evolution of storytelling in Malaysia and the emergence of storytelling as a business within the creative and cultural industry set the stage. Secondly, the chapter the attempt to redefine the industrial movement and growth of the Malaysian animation industry, meticulously tracing its path of industrialization within the dynamic landscape of Malaysia's media atmosphere. Lastly, the changing consumption culture surrounding locally produced animation products in Malaysia is highlighted, setting the groundwork for understanding evolving audience preferences.

Transitioning seamlessly, Chapter 3 delves into the literature review, focusing on the theory of transmedia storytelling and its worldbuilding counterpart. Within the expansive scope of popular culture and media convergence, this chapter establishes the theoretical foundation that informs the subsequent analytical exploration. Next, the research methodology unfolds in Chapter 4, providing a detailed blueprint for the qualitative case study research. This chapter meticulously outlines the theoretical propositions, research objectives, and research questions. Additionally, it offers insights into the intricacies of data collection and analysis, providing a robust framework for empirical investigation.

Chapter 5 serves as the gateway to the empirical realm, presenting the findings of the data collection process. This section meticulously reviews the gathered data, shedding light on the diverse perspectives obtained from the identified respondents who contribute to the study. Chapters 6 and 7 form the analytical core of the thesis. Here, the results of the analysis are meticulously outlined, debated, and discussed. These chapters provide a platform for interpreting the empirical findings within the broader context of the theoretical framework, establishing meaningful connections and insights.

In essence, this structural framework of the thesis ensures a coherent and sequential progression from establishing contextual underpinnings to theoretical foundations and, finally, empirical insights. Each chapter plays a vital role in building a holistic understanding of the *Ejen Ali* franchise and its dynamic relationship with transmedia storytelling. The meticulous organization of the thesis structure facilitates a nuanced exploration, allowing readers to navigate seamlessly through the diverse facets of the study.

CHAPTER 2: STORYTELLING BUSINESS AND INDUSTRIALIZATION IN MALAYSIA

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the context and background underpinning this case study research. The focal point of this discussion is the significant changes within the Malaysian animation industry since the introduction of the *Upin & Ipin* animation in 2007, particularly evident in the film segment of the industry. Prior to the debut of *Upin & Ipin*, a majority of animation films experienced financial losses in the cinematic market. However, post the debut, there was a discernible shift, wherein several animation films began to amass remarkable blockbuster collections, consequently surpassing other local films within the narrative entertainment industry.

In supporting these assertions, this chapter contends that the observed changes are tied to the shifting local consumption culture pertaining to local animation products, thereby catapulting the industry into widespread popularity. The subsequent sections will delve into the dynamics of this cultural transformation and its consequential impact on the animation industry. In light of these considerations, the primary objective of this chapter is to establish the Malaysian animation industry as the contextual backdrop for the ensuing case study. Specifically, the increasing popularity of local animation products and the concurrent change in the consumption culture surrounding domestic animation works serve as the background within which the case study on the *Ejen Ali* franchise is undertaken.

The subsequent discussions will navigate the dense facets of the Malaysian animation industry, offering nuanced insights into the factors that have propelled its transformation. The examination will extend beyond mere industry statistics, delving into the cultural dynamics that have redefined the landscape of animation consumption in the Malaysian context. By highlighting these multifaceted dimensions, this chapter attempts

to present a comprehensive understanding of the context within which the case study on the *Ejen Ali* franchise unfolds.

2.1 Storytelling business and industrialization in Malaysia

It has been a widespread thought to say the modern society have deep appreciation toward storytelling. In popular culture, storytelling has been used to distract and obtain attention from the public consumer towards a set of messages and/or narratives (Berger, 1997). It has the capacity and inert quality to entice audiences to engage, immerse, and spend waking/conscious time with it. As argued by Del Negro and Kimball (2021), storytelling satisfy human's critical social and individual needs to communicate their feeling and experiences through story. Added with the advent of digital technology and new media, storytelling is empowered as more channels and medium available to carry the flow of its narratives across various subsets of audiences (Choo, Abdullah, & Nawi, 2020). Moreover, the idea that digital technologies have brought upon multitude of modes and affordances to modern media consumer have open a vast opportunity for storytelling to be prepared with multi-modality features, thus exponentially expand its ability to provide addictive consumption experience to its audience (Smith, 2018a).

With the advent of mediated channel or "narrative medium" as proposed by Berger (1997), these ideas and messages can even last for a lifetime and move beyond geographical boundaries. With that, it can be typical for storytelling to be deemed as an all-round communication tool that come with wide arrays of benefits (Abidin & Razak, 2003; Barker & Gower, 2010; Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003). In the healthcare education sectors, for example, storytelling has become an emerging tool for enhancing teaching and learning experiences. Research on this topic shed a light that storytelling has been found to assist in development of health assessment skills among nursing student (Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003). Other beneficial account of storytelling has been tested by various research spanning across multiple areas of disciplines like marketing (Bassano et

al., 2019; Lee & Shin, 2015; Pulizzi, 2012), management (Brown, Denning, Groh, & Prusak, 2005; Reissner & Pagan, 2013), education (Abidin & Razak, 2003; Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003; Kalogeras, 2014; Negro, 2021), and entertainment (Deutsches Filmmuseum Frankfurt am Main, 2015; Perryman, 2008; Ryan & Thon, 2014).

Early record on storytelling in Malaysia indicates that this practice is a means of cultural activity and entertainment that provide society with an escape from everyday life towards a fantastical world whereby a real-world struggle and conflict can be temporary forgotten. As written by Winstedt and Aldworth (1916) when describing a Malay storyteller:

> "Adventure had gone out of this life; his home was poor; his clothes cotton, and his wife old and ugly. But as he recited, he lived in a different world; princes in the splendor of old world raiment fought battles with magic arts and weapons, rescued lovely maidens in distress, travelled to land in search of adventure, debonair, irresistible, possessed of the secret perpetual youth and passion" (Winstedt & Aldworth, 1916, p. 44)

Consistent with Del Negro and Kimball (2021), storytelling (historically speaking) had been used to fulfill individual needs of expressing feeling and experience through as story. Even in modern society, storytelling can provide escape from everyday challenges. Hisham (2015) have found that, in Malaysia, cinema goers consume films and blockbuster movies to relief stress from working.

I want to make a case that storytelling encompasses the process in which narratives are built and delivered to a determined set of audience. Agreeing with Goody (2006), storytelling is a subset of human discourse that deals with narrative as a universal expression. Ryan (2017), on the other hand, added that the discipline of narratology provides a perspective that comprehend storytelling as a story/discourse dichotomy which explain equally important function of the signified (represented by story) and the signifier

(represented by discourse involving a storyteller and the audience). Thus, storytelling may represent dynamics in human communication that involve (1) the storyteller, (2) the story, and (3) the audience. Without a storyteller, a story will not be told or, perhaps, built for storytelling activity. And a storyteller always finds their audience to deliver story to complete the storytelling activity. This dynamic is deeply embedded in society for centuries as it enables ideas and messages to be effectively communicated in a variety of settings and sociological structures (Davidhizar & Lonser, 2003).

There are arguments indicating that storytelling is solely an oral-based communication approach. As proposed by Dujmović (2006), storytelling itself is an art of narrating tale from memory rather than by reading. Furthermore, the practice dictate that storytellers have make use of voice, facial expressions, gesture, eye contact, and interaction to connect with audience (Hsu, 2010). With that storytelling engage audience and make them participators rather than passive listeners (Daniel, 2007). Description on storytelling outline by Dujmović (2006), Hsu (2010) and Daniel (2007) above somehow posited that storytelling is an oral practice. This can be true especially in the past, whereby mass media technology is not readily available to society.

Although storytelling, in context of Malaysia (and its history) arguably begin with oral tradition, I tend to disagree that it is unique to only for oral approach as proposed by Dujmović (2006), Hsu (2010), and Daniel (2007). As been said previously, storytelling as a communication tool deal with narrative, specifically how it would be constructed, how it would be told, and how it would be received. With this logic, the concept of storytelling goes beyond oral tradition and include in any form that fits the criteria. As long as the communication dynamic deals with (1) the storyteller, (2) the story, and (3) the audience, it can be considered as storytelling regardless of its form. Goody (2006), for example, makes a case that storytelling using oral approach is the foundation that built

written storytelling in its earlier version, known as novel; both formats, whether it is oral based or written, are still considered as storytelling.

Storytelling can function in various forms, and possibly, immune to obsoletion from technological change. In facts, storytelling is empowered with progress in media technologies. Moreover, it is not a farfetched thought to assert that storytelling is the key toward relevance in media sector. Traditional approach or technology that is typically deemed as outdated can be brought to light with storytelling. For example, Choo et al. (2020) make a case that both oral storytelling and digital storytelling have their respective strengths to be exploited as a tools in educational settings. While digital storytelling can provide with wide arrays of functionalities in classroom settings, teacher can still use oral storytelling in their pedagogy depending on its suitability in teaching and learning environment (Choo et al., 2020). Although oral approach seems traditional compared to its digital counterpart, with storytelling, it can maintain its relevance in educational settings.

Ryan (2017) posits that the nature of storytelling is much more mental than verbal because the stories will remain inscribed in the audience mind long after the signifiers (which is the discourse) is conducted. Due to storytelling ability to spark imagination, I tend to agree with M. S. M. Saad (1993) as he said that storytelling is a powerful means of providing individuals with life-enhancing mental image. This, in turn, embed entertaining qualities in storytelling that create a tendency of which individuals would gravitate to. Additionally, storytelling provides a space for culture and values to be preserved within society. I as a tradition, is passed down from generation to generation to cultivate positive norms in societies through representation of moral values in the narratives (M. S. M. Saad, 1993). Within the current film industry in Malaysia, for example, the government have always cooperated with the private sector in making sure

that local contents are portraying Malaysian culture and values to the public (Hisham, 2015; Hisham & Rahman, 2018; Muthalib, 2013; Shamsudin, 2014).

In conjunction, cultivation of positive norms in societies through storytelling can be seen through the government's advocacy to instill nationalistic ideology to local film consumer. In the 70s, the government had promoted a campaign known as Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (National Culture) to ensure societal unity among multiracial population in Malaysia (Halim & Abdullah, 2020). Film is one of the vehicles to relay the message of National Culture to local audience. Jonit (2007) proposed that locally made films that portray the criteria of National Culture are to be categorized as National Film and should be at the center of the attention of the Malaysian audience. He believes that local filmmaker should be serious in taking the responsibility of advocating for National Culture through their works (Jonit, 2007). This goes to show that storytelling through the means of cinematic artworks have some forms of influence toward the societal construct; thus, cementing the thought that storytelling possesses significant roles in the Malaysian society.

Through the lens of economy, I can further illustrate the gravity of influence, perhaps, the level of significance that storytelling possesses within the society. Naudé and Nagler (2015) have posited that an economic development encompasses structural transformation within a society based on low-productive traditional activities into an economic production of complex products. Extrapolating further, Weiss (2018) mentioned that structural transformation in an economic settings is driven by industrialization whereby a process of transition of economies from low income to higher income status due to increasing productivity takes place. Industry, on the other hand, refers to a collection of organization that engage with an economic activity pertaining the same identifiable goods or product (Chen, 2017). Therefore, I argue that industrialization, in essence, refer progress in industrial development.

I tend to agree with Naudé and Nagler (2015) that progress in economic development can be seen through the production activities that form an industry. As I attempt to visit the concept of storytelling as a social tradition in Malaysia, I realize that storytelling has been fueling the society with creative products forming the entertainment industry as early as in the early 20th century. Theatrical productions such as *Bangsawan* (performance involving acting, dancing, and singing), *Mak Yong* (dance theater), *Wayang Kulit* (shadow play), and *Jikey* (choral singing, music and dance drama) were among flourishing creative artworks that are popular among the public consumer about a century ago (M. S. M. Saad, 1993). These productions typically adopt stories local folktales into their artworks and performed at weddings, thanksgiving during harvesting season, and at state fairs (M. S. M. Saad, 1993).

It has been illustrated above that storytelling has been the cultural tradition among Malaysian society even in the early 20th century. While it is important for social purpose, storytelling had become even significant with the adoption of economic paradigm into the tradition. As storytelling become more popular among the public consumers, various product has been innovated based on storytelling tradition to be prepared for public consumption. Caporaso and Levine (1992) mentioned that "economy" itself loosely refers to the management of resource in any given context. Appropriating thought from Caporaso and Levine (1992) alongside with ideas from Naudé and Nagler (2015), the progress in storytelling in Malaysia can be seen through the productivity of creative output involving storytelling tradition.

I have mentioned earlier in this chapter that, in context of Malaysia, storytelling is a tradition that describe a process of which narratives are built and delivered to a set of audience. Added with economic activity revolving this tradition, the role of storytelling expands among local societies. As storytelling afford multimodality, different modes of storytelling create different product. With more organization engage with the production

of said product the industry is born. Historically in Malaysia, storytelling in may begin with oral practices (Winstedt & Aldworth, 1916). As society grow, the need to employ additional elements to storytelling had birthed new ways of telling a story. Products that combine storytelling with other artforms (music, dances, puppeteer, and songs) such as *Bangsawan*, *Mak Yong*, *Wayang Kulit*, and *Jikey* were performed to the public as a mode of entertainment (M. S. M. Saad, 1993). Having this understanding, I tend to consider that storytelling itself, is not an industry. However, a collective production of a certain storytelling-based product in any modes is, by definition, an industry.

Contemporary storytelling in Malaysia presents a potential that could impact the national growth both in terms of social and economy. While storytelling brought in tools for the nation to influence social construct at least in the context of the film industry as I have argued above, I believe that, additionally, storytelling also primed with capability to fuel and nourish the local economy with commercial activity. The intrinsic ability of storytelling to captivate audience and maintaining their attention towards the messages (or ideas) in transmission, perhaps, makes storytelling a lucrative means of industrial exploit. As storytelling becomes more relevant in the national economy, its roles as a tradition among local communities has shifted into becoming a vehicle for an industrialization for creative product in the Malaysian entertainment sector.

I want to make the assertion that it is an inherent trait of storytelling tradition in Malaysia to infuse multimodality (catalyzed by existing and emerging tools and technologies) in the storytelling process to improve audience experience with the story. Oral tradition in storytelling practiced by malay storyteller in early 20th century have already adopted such paradigm. *Penglipurlara*, *Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong*, *Bangsawan,* and *Jikey* are among commercial productions that employed music, dances and various artforms in the storytelling to enhance audience experience with the narrative (M. S. M. Saad, 1993). Looking through the history on contemporary media atmosphere in

Malaysia, similar practice, in which multimodality is appreciated among storyteller (now content producer), can be seen. As mass communication technologies begun to exert its influence on local mediascape, the storytelling tradition also begun to change. Traditional folklore that has been previously told through oral tradition makes its way from one mediated channel to another.

Local folklore of *Hang Tuah*, for example, has been through numerous repurposing utilizing one medium to another. Moving from oral tradition, its earliest publication dated back as a novel in 1908 known as *The Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Tale of Hang Tuah) (Hunt, 2002). As readership culture revolving print medium diversified, the narrative of Hang Tuah is adopted into several version of comic books such as *Komik Hang Tuah* (1950) by *Persatuan Guru Kedah* (Kedah Teachers' Association) and *Komik Hang Tuah di Air Masin* (1954) by Ahmad Bahtiar (Salleh, 2012). Following up upon its popularity in print medium, the narrative is adopted again into feature film titled *Hang Tuah* in 1956 starred by the infamous P Ramlee, and animated film by the name *Silat Lagenda* in 1998 (Muthalib, 2007).

Hang Tuah is not the only local folklore that had been through the process of repurposing intended for diversifying modality in storytelling. *Badang*, another folktales hero, in which its story was told in the *Sulalatus As-Salihin* (1614), also has been adopted into comic book, interactive book, films and TV series (Ghazali, 2017; Mohaideen, 2016; Ngah, 1984; Shamsudin, 2014). This further illustrate that storytelling in Malaysia is dynamic and prone to changes in relation to technologies. As more platforms are adopted in local media atmosphere, more options available of which producer can exploit to realize their stories for public consumption. Various media channel offers different modalities to be enjoyed by the consumer which is heavily exploited by producer to satisfy the public's growing demand for entertainment through storytelling. Additionally, every commercial rendition of a story developed for public consumption exert social

influence in which sparked a cultural shift among audience. Audience who enjoys *Hang Tuah* narratives from reading a comic book, might have to experience the narratives in different way with the film version of the story. Both comic book and film have exerted differing cultural demands during consumption with one can be enjoyed with friend and family by sharing reading material and another with get-together and simultaneous watching experience in the cinema.

Storytelling had become a means of entrepreneurial activity capable of fueling the national economy at the same time exerting sociocultural influence onto the public. This movement, as an effects, creates wide array of industries (such as film industry, novel industry, broadcasting and TV industry, and animation industry) that interacted with one another revolving around the tradition of storytelling. The government had to acknowledge the present of this economy by addressing them in the national policy. Dasar Kebudayaaan Kebangsaan (DKK, National Culture Policy) 1971, for example, emphasize on preserving and cultivating local culture to inspire societal unity among multi-racial community in Malaysia. The installation of this policy motivates local film producer to embed local culture into their production (Hisham, 2015). Realizing the importance of the film sector as an income-generating industry while spearheading national interest of promoting local culture and values, the government had established National Development Film Corporation (FINAS) in accordance to National Development Film Act 1981 (act 244) to strengthen local entrepreneurial venture into film industry (Hisham & Rahman, 2018). Additionally, the enforcement of Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara (DIKN, National Creative Industry Policy) further strengthen the creative industry both in terms of income-generation as well as cultural promotion with emphasis to creative multimedia, cultural, and art creative industry (Hisham & Rahman, 2018; Kementerian Penerangan Komunikasi dan Kebudayaan, 2009)

Storytelling has a significant role within the creative and cultural industry in Malaysia. I proposed to visit the idea of "storytelling business" whereby storytellers across various media industries exploit storytelling for economic gain. Admittedly, there are various aspects of entrepreneurial venture available in an industry. One can provide services or product depending on which commercial tool they want to employ. In film sector, a company may use international import-export commerce to supply local filmmaker with industrial-grade machines and appliance for production purpose. This venture, although in film sector, does not involve any storytelling; rather, it enables said company to profit from selling an equipment to the filmmaker. However, for film producers, storytelling is a much more significant aspect of their business. Thus, they will channel their resources into commercializing the development of narratives, the way it will be conveyed as well as how the narratives will be consumed for the purpose of future profitability.

The 21st century storytelling in Malaysia had evolved from a traditional cultural activity towards industry-wide tools for entrepreneurial ventures and cultural promotion among government agencies and private entity. Storytelling business does not equate to an industry of storytelling; rather, it describes entrepreneurial venture of exploiting storytelling as a commercial tool to create cultural and creative commodity intended for public consumption across various industries. Smith (2018a) agreed to this notion because he proposed the idea that within media industry atmosphere, narrative design and media form are two separate entities that are in relationship with one another forming a business dynamic capable of making significant economic impact in the consumer market. This aligned with the concept of "historical poetics" by Bordwell (1989) in which describe that narrative's characteristics (as been developed by producers) are considered in relation to their historical, technological, and industrial condition of production. Smith (2018a) added that storytelling business in context of media convergence can be seen through

media conglomerate's tendency to circulate popular character (an element of storytelling) across multiple media platforms (Smith, 2018b).

I have mentioned above that storytelling induces relevance to traditional communication approach by illustrating how storytelling can be an effective teaching method regardless of whether it delivered through an oral approach or using digital technology in a teaching and learning environment. Extrapolating on that, given the right treatment by industry player, storytelling business can spark relevance and revive traditional media which often associated with obsoletion. History on American comic book industry shed a light into how proper engagement of storytelling business pull the industry out of obsoletion. It is apparent that in the 60s, American comic book industry had suffered a downfall with downward facing trend of revenue year after year (Bongco, 2014; Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003). With the advent of television as an alternative to entertainment among young audience, comic book seems to be on the verge of obsoletion (Palmer, 2010) Struggling to survive, industry players had actively seeks new ways to boost the comic book demand within American consumer's market. Short lived boost had happened due the popularity of Batman television series during 1966 – 1968; however, it is not sufficient to propels the whole industry out of decline (Palmer, 2010).

The boost, however, does indicate that the needs to employ storytelling business strategy to incorporate other media format to portray the original narrative. Palmer (2010) argued that there were many firms in the comic book industry had close for business due to the decline except for Marvel Comic and DC Comic. Both companies had been exploiting creative asset licensing as one of the primary income-generation method that propels their companies to be profitable in the current mediascape (Palmer, 2010). With the involvement of media conglomerate like Disney and Time Warner, greater resources have been invested into comic book properties to be repurposed for other media format which generating substantial income for the new media instalment, but also the to the

comic book itself (Palmer, 2010); illustrating that proper storytelling business model can revive a failing and declining industry into a profitable venture.

The storytelling business paradigm has forces media industry to shift from emphasis on new product (create as many titles as possible) to emphasis on story (repurposing and/or extending elements of popular stories). In Hollywood for example, Disney acquisition over Marvel Comic showed how storytelling business is at its peak relevance in current mediascape. Beginning with the rebooting and new installation of Ironman film in 2008, Marvel started the portrayal of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) through various intertwining stories (developed in multiple media format) in the global entertainment industry. Subsequently, various array of instalment spanning across multiple platforms revolving around the fictional universe like films, *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013*), Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014); short films, *The Consultant* (2011), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Thor's Hammer* (2011), *Item 47* (2012), *Agent Carter* (2013), and *All Hail the King* (2014); and comic book Avengers prelude *Fury's Big Week* (2012) (Menard, 2015).

This section is part of the context chapter of this thesis that provide a review on storytelling as a communication tool, its historical utilization in Malaysia and its appropriation in the business settings. I have made the argument early in this section that storytelling encompasses complete communication between the source of the message (storyteller), the message in transmission (story), and the receiver (audience). In other word, storytelling deals with the creation of narrative, the way it is delivered and how it would be consumed. As it is arguably begun with oral tradition, storytelling has been immune to obsoletion and keep on evolving alongside with technology in the Malaysia mediascape. Additionally, I also make a case that in 21st century Malaysia, storytelling

has become a significant income-generating ventures that attract investment from local entrepreneurs and government agencies; thus, fueling wide arrays of industries with creative products. Added to the benefit of income-generation potential, storytelling also serves as vehicle to promote local culture and values to the public, signifying its importance in the Malaysian media atmosphere.

I also explore the notion of "storytelling business" in which I argue that storytelling as a tradition is not meant to be an industry. Rather, storytelling is an instrument for entrepreneurial ventures in the development of creative and cultural product. Hence, storytelling is the means of which various industries grow and expand. In Malaysia, the advent of storytelling business paradigm within creative and cultural industry is apparent in the animation sector. With this, it is an interest of this thesis to visit animation industry and uncover productions patterns that signify the way animation producer construct their storytelling business model not only to survive globalization (the inflow of foreign animation to local market), but also to thrive as sustainable and profitable entrepreneurial venture. Different from the western media conglomerate like Disney, local animation industry's storytelling business, while having an economic motivation as driving force of operation, have been assuming their responsibility of carrying public aspiration towards the preservation and the promotion of Malaysian culture and values. With that, next section of this chapter will explore the subsequent context of the thesis which are the Malaysian animation industry.

2.2   Industrial progress in the Malaysian Animation Industry

This section provides an overview of the industrialization of animation sector in Malaysian mediascape. It will make the argument that media firms in the animation sectors are actively commodifying fictional narratives through multi-medium productions for economic dominance as well as satisfying public aspiration of popularizing local culture and values to national and international audience. This argument is strengthened

particularly by the advent of digitization that allow production process to be more efficient and the accelerating globalization that increase connectivity and access to audience across national and international boundaries. With that, discussion in chapter will shed a light into the potential of the Malaysian animation industry in becoming global supplier for animated content.

Industrialization of the Malaysian animation industry has been argued to be classified and simplified in 4 phases which is represented in table 1. Phase 1 refers to the early usage of animation in the media industry whereby the production rely on manual and traditional method, phase 2 refers to a stage in which industry players started to adopt computer software to assist with the production process, phase 3 refers to emergence of 3D technology in the animation industry and phase 4 refers to the current state of the animation industry where industry player put in greater emphasis towards storytelling in the production of animation works (Mahalingam, 2012)

Phase	Period	Details
Phase 1	1949	Traditional and manual production
Phase 2	Late 1980s	Utilization of software to assist production
Phase 3	Mid 1990s	Advent of 3D technology in animation production
Phase 4	Current	Need for emphasis on storytelling

Table 2.1: Industrialization of animation industry as proposed by Hassan Muthalib (Mahalingam, 2012)

This 4-phased description of the industrialization of the animation industry paints the picture of the animation industry growth can be seen from the adoption of new technology and the improvisation of production process. However, it does not encompass the economic aspects of the animation production and the roles of animation in the cultivation of local culture and values in Malaysia. Further polishing the 4-phased industrialization argument, I posit that Malaysian animation industry, since its birth in the 50s, underwent three (3) primary industrial changes encouraged by the new technology, foreign influence, and the need for economic sustainability within the industry.

The animation industry, since its inception in the Malaysian media atmosphere, have undergone several significant changes. Arguably, these changes are fuelled by technology and foreign influence. The first significant change, or rather the emergence of animation, occurred in the early 50s. During this period, the animation sector began as part of the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) whereby a foreign national, Gillie Potter, was recruited to head the art department which was tasked to handle the animation production of the company (Muthalib, 2013); noting the first influence from foreign entity on the animation sector. Additionally, the roles of technology also can be seen in the fact that MFU already had access to film equipment specific for animation production which evidently used the same technology that was utilized to make animated diagram during world war II (Azmi, Hamid, & Hashim, 2014). At this emergence stage, animation only had been utilized to create title page for numerous films (produced by the MFU) as well as a means of commercial service to the private and public organization (Lent, 2003; Muthalib, 2013).

Malaysian animation industry has been keeping up with the global trend in terms of technological adoption and skilled worker. This can be seen through the Malaysian's achievement and participation in globally recognized productions. There are several cases in which either local individual or local companies involved in international animation and visual effect (VFX) projects. For example, D'Lun Wong, a Malaysian who previously worked at local animation company, managed to be one of the animators in Pixar Studio and contributed to internationally-renown animated works like *Frozen II* and *Raya and The Last Dragon* (Cheang, 2021). In lieu of that, the government's Film In Malaysia Incentive (FIMI) which gives 30 percent rebates on productions done in Malaysia, including post production works like visual effects, enable local production firms to obtain contract from oversees producers. Case in point, Base Digital Production, as studio

in Kuala Lumpur that had worked on *Star Wars: The Force Awaken, Transformer: Age of Extinction, Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Aquaman* (Begum, 2020).

Considering other titan like China and India in the outsourcing industry, Malaysia is doing a remarkable job of supplying resources (in terms of skilled workers in the animation and VFX sector) to global client. Cases above indicate that Malaysia have the necessary access to technologies as well as the means to utilized it, both technical resources and human resources. Impressive as it is, the more pressing issues within the animation industry that are worth noting is the competitiveness of local product. While Malaysia undergone necessary progress in terms of producing local talent and accessing the right technology, it pays attention to the local ability to create Malaysian-based animated content developed especially for the storytelling industry.

It was until the 80s, animation industry began to toy around with the idea of embedding storytelling into animation product, eventually releasing the first animated story called *Hikayat Sang Kancil* in 1984 (Lent, 2003; Muthalib, 2013; Rafik et al., 2020). This effort to pioneer animated works through storytelling had been attributed to the cultivation of local values among national audiences (Rafik et al., 2020). In the period of 90s until early 2000s, which I may posit as growth period (the second industrial change), the animation industry, once again, was affected by foreign influences and technological adaptations. The growth period marked the mushrooming of local fiction in the animation format as well as acceptance among national consumers towards animation content as a form of entertainment (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). With the help of cell animation technology in the 90s, production cost was minimized and the animation quality was improved resulting in numerous notable animated works were released for public consumptions like *Anak-Anak sidek* (1997), *Usop Sontorian* (1995) and *Kampung Boy* (1998) (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Omar & Ishak, 2012).

Amidst the increasing productions within the industry in the growth period, there was a concern that the influx of foreign animated content in Malaysia might challenge the status quo of local culture and value among Malaysian audience at least in terms of representation in the animation sectors (Lent, 2003; Rafik et al., 2020). Because of this, the Malaysian government had begun to campaign for better portrayal of Malaysian culture and values in local animation works (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). Muthalib (2013) states that local producers have been relying on national budget (through the national television station, RTM) to stay afloat in the animation industry. With that, the government have a degree of influence over which content to fund, which in this period, those that promotes local culture and values. This was the primary factors in which majority of popular animated works in the 90s like *Anak-Anak Sidek* (1997), *Usop Sontorian* (1995) and *Kampung Boy* (1998) strongly portrayed local culture and values (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2007).

The most current era of the Malaysia animation industry, which I would want to describe as the popularization period (the third industrial change) begin in 2007 in which the *Upin dan Ipin*, animated work by Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd, was first released to the public. This animation was considered a phenomenon in Malaysia as it managed to gain substantial popularity not only in domestic market, but also in the international market (Abdul Ghani, 2015; Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2013). *Upin dan Ipin* utilized cutting edge digital-based 3D technology, arguably an upgrade from cell animation technology used by producers in the growth period (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019). Following upon the success of *Upin dan Ipin*, other 3D animation began to pop out within the industry and ultimately succeeding in becoming popular in domestic and oversea market. *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali* are the two prominent animated fictions that have been dominating the storytelling business in Malaysia with numerous awards and

phenomenal blockbuster collection (Atak, 2019; Bernama, 2018; Chua, 2019; Malaymail, 2017; mStar, 2019; Shim, 2020; Zainudin, 2016).

The popularization period marked a new milestone in the animation industry as local production are widely popular among local consumers. In relative to the previous period of the animation industry, while technological adoption (digital-based 3D rendition) remains influential in the production aspect, foreign influence, once again have some form of roles in the development of the industry. As more foreign content been bombarded in Malaysia, local producers (which are producing animation content with Malaysian culture and values) are incentivized to improve their quality and competitive advantage in the market. The government had realized that global animation and VFX industry have grown significant reaching USD 270 billion in 2020; thus, ripe with opportunities to increase national revenue at the same time promoting Malaysian culture oversea (Bernama, 2019). Improving track record of animation works in the popularization period might indicate that the animation industry is not only expected to be a medium of cultural cultivation, but also a means of commodification for an economic gain.

Referring to the Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara (DIKN, National Creative Industry Policy), animation and digital content is categorized as a product within creative multimedia industry (Kementerian Penerangan Komunikasi dan Kebudayaan, 2009). The primary emphasis of this policy regarding the animation industry is to cultivate animated content that represent and promote local culture at the same time capable of generating sustainable revenue for the country (ibid). It is known that the government believes that the animation industry is doing so well because of the cultural aspect in the storytelling. In fact, the ministry of communication and multimedia had urged animation producers to use the Malaysian culture as a selling point for domestic and global viewership (Bernama, 2019).

It would make sense that the representation of local culture is a factor in the success of the animation industry to garner popularity in domestic and global market. In fact, *Upin dan Ipin* animation's success in Indonesia has been attributed to the portrayal of local culture and customs in the story (Ariffin & Sallehuddin, 2022). Research into the Malaysian animation industry have always gravitate toward the aesthetic aspect of the animated works, specifically the representation of culture and moral value in the narrative (Abdul Ghani, 2015; Khalis & Mustaffa, 2017; Khalis et al., 2016; Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Omar & Ishak, 2012; Rafik et al., 2020). Technological implementation as well as accessible infrastructure also become popular interest among local researchers on the animation industry (Shah, Rafi, & Perumal, 2021). While those research paints a good picture to describe the industry, it does not pay attention to the storytelling business aspect of the animation and how it is implemented amidst technological convergence and globalization.

I want to make a case that the success of the Malaysian animation industry in the popularization period is attributed to a much more significant factor which is its storytelling business model specifically in the aspect of narrative design. The strength of Malaysian animation in the popularization period comes from its storytelling because, I argue, it is responsive to the demand of the existing industrial conditions. Based on the progress within the industry, it seems that producers are inclined to adopt several media format for their fictional narrative as a means of strategic approach in developing narrative across multiple media channels. It can be argued that this storytelling business model might imitate the business approach as conducted by western media conglomerate like Disney whereby the production of repurposing or extending element from existing and popular stories is put to a greater emphasis. This is because leading local animation house like Monsta Studio (creator of BoBoiBoy and Mechamoto) and Wan Animation

Studio (creator of Ejen Ali) seems to adopt asset licensing business model to further profit from their respective intellectual property.

> Animonsta is not merely an animation studio. "People tend to call us an animation company. We're not – we're a character company. We create characters, and we represent characters. From these characters' popularities, we're able to make and license merchandises." - Nizam Razak, CEO of Animonsta Studio (Yee, 2019)

Similarities between local animation houses' approach in storytelling business with the production strategy by western media conglomerate are logical and expected due to the demand of the current mediascape. With globalization, Malaysian audience are exposed to globally distributed new media technologies as well as latest arrays of creative output from various part of the world (Samsudin & Latiffah, 2010). This would mean that, Malaysian audience have the tendency to follow global pattern in terms of media consumption (Samsudin & Latiffah, 2010). Adopting the strategies by media conglomerate seems to be paid off since local animation like *Upin dan Ipin*, *BoBoiBoy*, and *Ejen Ali* not only thrive domestically, but also internationally (Atak, 2019; Begum, 2019b; Malaymail, 2017; mStar, 2019).

The idea of incorporating multiple media formats into storytelling business strategy in the animation industry is not unique to the popularization period. Adoption of various media platform for creative works, specifically in the storytelling business, seems to be a plausible and feasible venture among animation producers as early as the emergence period. *Kampung Boy* (TV series 1997 – 1999), a well-known and popular animation works in the 90s, was a rendition of a previously published graphic novel titled *The Kampung Boy* (1979). Although there were no other animation production for *Kampung Boy* after the TV series instalment, this creative franchise still maintains its popularity and its narrative had been repurposed to other media format like theatrical

production and themed restaurant (Ridwan, 2011; A. S. M. Yusof, 2018). Additionally, another animation work in the 90s titled *Usop Sontorian* (TV series 1996 – 1999) also had been previously published as a comic strip in a local comic magazine (Azman & Radzi, 2017). Same strategy also appear with a couple other animation titles made by Malaysian like *Anak-Anak Sidek* (TV Animation, 1999 – 2003) which was also portrayed in comic book version, and *Cicakman The Series* (TV Animation, 2017) which had been portrayed as feature films and comic book, (Mohamed, 2008; Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2021). This provide a clear indication that incorporating multiple media platform is an accepted industry practice among players in the Malaysian animation industry as early as the growth period of the industry.

The intention of this section is to describe the industrialization of the Malaysian animation industry for the purpose of establish the second primary context of my thesis. Early in this chapter, I illustrate that the storytelling in Malaysia begin with a social tradition and evolved to a highly sought-after entrepreneurial ventures due to its inert quality of entertaining and engaging with consumers. Embedding entrepreneurial paradigm into storytelling in an industrial scale in Malaysia forces producers (from various industry) to engage with storytelling business where the production of creative works involving storytelling is encouraged and influenced by economic factors.

The descriptions of this section about the second context for the thesis, the Malaysian animation industry, provide clearer picture on how industry players involved in creative works revolving storytelling (in this case, animation work) engage with storytelling business. By illustrating that the Malaysian animation industry had gone through three (3) primary changes, I make a case that the growth of the industry has been motivated by foreign influence, technological changes, and economic sustainability. The emergence stage (50s until late 80s) and the growth period (90s until 2000s) of the Malaysian animation industry have shown that local producers were motivated to create

content that portrayed local culture and values to combat the influx of foreign animation in Malaysia. Not only that, the improvisation of production output due to the advent of new technology is also apparent in both periods.

The popularization stage (beginning with *Upin dan Ipin* in 2008) marked new milestone for the industry as local animation becomes popular among consumer and dominate the film industry by topping the box office charts as well as numerous local and international awards. I attributed this significant milestone with the industry players ability to execute the right storytelling business model. Similar to the practice by western conglomerate like Disney, dominating local animation producers like Animonsta Studio and Wau Animation studio engage with the adoption of multiple media format to optimize on the economic potential of licensing business propels their animated brand to local and international success.

Although this strategy seems like the imitation of western practice, I argue that local production house engagement with storytelling with multiple media format is the result of adhering to the demands of the current mediascape so that their production is relevant and competitive in the market. Summarizing my thought on the Malaysian Animation industry, I believe that this industry has been in the space of cultural preservation at the same time providing opportunities for income-generation for the players as well that the nation. Due to its growing roles in the Malaysian society as well as the economy, the Malaysian animation industry has been continuously improving its functions and productivity amidst the advent of new technology and foreign influence. By engaging effectively with multiple media formats, players in the animation industry seems to be thriving the local market. The subsequent section will deal with the final context of the thesis which is the concept of consumption culture and its description regarding the Malaysian animation industry.

2.3   Changing consumption culture in the Malaysian Animation Industry

This section of the context chapter offers examination towards the reception of local animation works among local audience. Specifically, it will discuss the idea that consumption culture (among local audience) towards animated content have a profound influence over the competitiveness of animation product in the market. Following upon that, I will proceed to argue that by understanding said idea (the influence of consumption culture towards animation product competitiveness), local producers seem to strategize their storytelling approach to ensure the consumption culture surrounding their product is reformed to their advantage. This argument will be illustrated through visiting the film sector of the animation industry where changes in local animation's performance in the market as it is influenced by consumption culture is clear and apparent.

Consumption, in its core, is a social behavior that is primarily intended to satisfy an individual needs (Dinningrum & Satiti, 2022). While consumption might be attributed to individual behavior, culture, on the other have, is a social formation and collective movement of a group that reflect a set of shared belief and orientation (Cobley, 2008; Schein, 1991). Culture present a strong influence on consumption behavior as it motivate and informs consumers on how they would spend their resources towards certain kind of product (Dinningrum & Satiti, 2022). Thus, consumption culture, as I would define for the purpose of this study, is a phenomenon that describes the pattern of consumption among a set of consumers towards any kinds of media product or services. The key aspect of consumption culture is the notion of "value" whereby the products/services' worth is determined in the mass market. Furthermore, value can be in many forms including economic, social, functional utility, as well as cultural.

The notion of "value" as argue above aligned with Dröge, Calantone, Agrawal, and Mackoy (1993) presupposition that consumption culture can be seen as an economic system in which the determination of value toward any kind of product as it is

disseminated in the mass market is taken into consideration. Dröge et al. (1993) even proceed to posit that consumption culture can be analyzed through the lens of micro (personal and individual level of analysis) and macro (external level analysis that takes into account facilitating factors and socioenvironmental factor). This further support that the notion of "value" (as it is appropriated to the object of consumption) is the driving force behind consumption culture and analyzing said value whether in micro or macro level can uncover cultural pattern of consumption among consumers.

Dröge et al. (1993) also proposed characteristics of consumption culture that is worth to be noted. Features that qualify the phenomenon of consumption culture should (1) involve a means of exchange between production and consumption, (2) be in the mass production/mass markets, and (3) include ceaseless introduction of new products and/or services (Dröge et al., 1993). While the first characteristics is obvious in which an exchange in terms of monetary unit occurs during the consumption process, the second and third characteristics are even more profound. Justifying the second characteristic, consumption culture is a social driven reaction towards goods/services; therefore, the phenomenon should involve mass consumers spending their resources to satisfy their needs through the purchase of a mass-produced goods/services. As an economic system, consumption culture needs to be ongoing so that continuous consumption activities occur to enforce cultural aspect of the system; thus, consistent product introduction is appropriate and seek upon to further satisfy the consumers' needs.

On different perspective, Gârdan, Epuran, and Gârdan (2016) keen on exploring "consumption of culture" which is identified as the consumption of any products and/or services that are directly resulted from the manifestation of culture, expression of artistic creativity. Their comprehension over consumption culture leans on the cultural products and its influence over the synthesis between individual consumption activities with the collective production of goods/ services within the cultural space. Agreeing with their

thought, consumption culture may bring forth value creation (to products, services, or combination of both) that is beneficial to the original provider – or in their word "equation producer" (Gârdan et al., 2016). This is because value does not necessarily embedded in terms of functional utility of a given products/services, but also consumers' interpretation of the issues that are covering the object of consumption (Gârdan et al., 2016).

Gârdan et al. (2016) exploration is brilliant for this thesis because they argue that value creation over the object of consumption can be driven by the consumption culture revolving said object. The idea of "customer orientation of companies" – a process in which collaboration and learning between companies and customers to satisfy both interest – may suggest that consumption culture can be formed specific to the advancement of the cultural space pertaining object of consumption. Following upon this logic, value of given products/services is defined with great emphasis towards consumers' needs rather than solely incorporating unnecessary element into production. The result of customer orientation of companies may not necessarily means something to be maximized (in production process), rather something that can be learned as firms attempt to provide better service to customer and improve performance (Akaka, Vargo, & Lusch, 2012). The interaction in the orientation process can be direct and indirect whereby the direct approach means that firms resources interact with customer resources within the dialog process and indirect approach means that firms resources interact with customer resources through independent value creation process.

Interestingly, the ideology in customer orientation of companies seems to align with the concept of participatory culture proposed by Henry Jenkins, a prominent scholars in popular culture and fan culture theory (Jenkins, 2006). Similar to the idea by Gârdan et al. (2016), consumers in the form of audience, especially in the current age of convergence, have tendency to form a knowledge community where collective expertise, non-canonical production, and metatextual material towards certain media product are

shared and discussed (Jenkins, 2006). Activities within the knowledge community is argued to be desirable because it enhance the value of the media brand (both in terms of individual production/publication or collective instalment spanning across multiple media platforms) in the market.

This is because activities of knowledge community (a form of participatory culture of audience towards their shared interest) will enforce a set of culture among audience in which I argue will enforce a consumption culture toward the content or the brand of the content.

> The appetite manifestation for different forms of artistic creation, not only educates and stimulates consumption culture of participants, as well as other categories of potential consumers in the community, but also contribute to the financing of official various cultural initiatives or the activity of institutions regulating the field (Gârdan et al., 2016, p. 56)

Jenkins (2006) illustrated this idea by analyzing the famous *Survivor* TV show's fan activities, particularly the coordinated movement, shared resources, and thorough discussion among fans to uncover intended-to-be-kept-secret element of the show (i.e. location, future participants, rewards, plot) themselves. This goes to show that the consumption culture revolving the *Survivor* TV show does not bound to having to watch it on television. Rather, it goes beyond TV-watching activities towards online reading and discussing, obtaining and sharing resources online, and to certain extent "spoiling" secret material to the public.

While activities in the knowledge community satisfy individual needs of the fan in the consumption process, the rapid growth of attention toward the content and/or brand of the content is valuable to the producer. Thus, consumption not only act as a tool that enable people to obtain goods and services, but also present opportunity for producers to exploit their consumers by manipulating the culture revolving the consumption of their

product. Horowitz (1985) have said that consumption culture is a complex phenomenon that involve struggle among powerful people and institution to try to impose their vision of a good society. Taking lesson from Harowitz, consumption culture might be a way for media producer to increase their value in the mass market.

The Malaysian animation industry has seen the phenomenon where consumption culture is shifting due the strategic movement by industry player. In the above discussion on the industrialization of the animation industry, I have made the argument that the significant improvement on the acceptance of local animation product can be seen in the popularization period (2007 – current) compared to the growth period (1990 – 2007). Phenomenal blockbuster result is much more probable for animation products in film industry in the popularization period with three flagship animation brands (*BoBoiBoy*, *Ejen Ali*, and *Upin dan Ipin*) spearheading the industry and dominating the media market. Proceeding forward, I am attempting to claim that this transition is due the shifting consumption culture among Malaysian audience towards animation product motivated by strategic storytelling business model employed by animation producers.

Starting from the debut of *Upin dan Ipin* TV series in 2008, animation industry in Malaysia had begun to receive much attention from the public. While there were numerous productions made available to public within industry since then, some animation works, particularly *BoBoiBoy*, *Ejen Ali*, and *Upin dan Ipin*, managed to become mainstream cultural product in Malaysia. Advertising material, merchandises, conventions and themeparks, as well as gamifications utilizing their brand are flowing into the mass consumer market. The scenery and atmosphere of the animation industry have become livelier in the popularization period as compared to the growth period. Consistent with the government's advocation in its national policies such as National Culture Policy (DKN, Dasar Kebudayaan Negara) and National Creative Industry Policy (DIKN, Dasar Industri Kebudayaan Negara), growing reception of local product among

local consumer in highly desirable as it can preserve national culture as well as generating revenue.

In my attempt to explore the why factor of the positive outlook of the animation industry in the popularization period as opposed to the growth period, I made the decision to utilize consumption culture theory into my assessment towards the animation industry to comprehend the growing support among local consumer towards locally produced animation product. I believe that this is justifiable because consumption surrounding the animation product fits three characteristic outlined by Dröge et al. (1993). As for the first characteristic, animation especially involving storytelling is an economically driven product available to be consumed through the means of monetary transaction supported by various commercial outlet such as television (paid by TV station), online channel (YouTube, Netflix, Disney Hotstar), and cinema. Furthermore, majority of the cultural products in the animation industry are prepared for mass consumption therefore exist in the mass market rather than made available for select few; thus, satisfying the second characteristic of consumption culture phenomenon. Lastly, it is a common practice for animation house to produce animation works in serial format and release them in parts periodically to keep on introducing new productions for public consumptions. Additionally, major cinematic productions also being premiered to the public from time-to-time showing consistency with the third characteristic of consumption culture phenomenon. Fitting all three requirements of a consumption culture phenomenon support my claim that consumption culture theory might provide profound insight into the assessment on the present growth in popularity of local animation product in domestic market.

Industrialization in the Malaysian animation industry in the last decade has been providing local entrepreneur in the creative sector with economic opportunity and business growth. Case in point, skilled labor and technical services offered by local animation house to overseas companies is one of the growing subsets of the industry and had been contributing to local economy (Amri, 2018; Bernama, 2016; Hassan, 2019). Apart from services offered to international firms, output productivity in the animation industry in terms production of local content also has become center of attention among Malaysian especially in the popularization period. Activities within the industry, as far as the production of content goes, seems to be on the right track both as a medium of cultural promotion and means of income generation (Shim, 2020; A. M. Yusof & Koris, 2018).

Specific to the storytelling business in the creative sector, the animation industry does not solely produce animation works in cinematic film format. Other forms of animation works also include short films and TV series (Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2007). Compilation by Mohd Khalis et al. (2019) shown that the majority of production among animation producers were in serial format (TV series). Specifically, throughout the 50s until 2020 there were 118 TV series produced as opposed to just 17 films produced by local producers (Shah et al., 2021). Despite this unbalanced, the success of the animation industry often attributed to the ability of local animation films to obtain significant blockbuster collection (placing themselves among top grossing film in Malaysia) and their ability to be marketed oversea (Begum, 2019b; Chua, 2016; Malaymail, 2020; mStar, 2016, 2019). Perhaps, consumer's response towards film instalment from local animation house is much more apparent compared to TV series whereby grossing revenues (both domestic and international) obtained from films are generally exposed to the public as opposed to the TV series; hence it is much easier to gauge the success of animation films compared to TV series.

Narrowing the scope of animation industry into its films sector offers chance to understand how consumption culture affect the performance of an animation works in Malaysia. Particularly, I want to make a case that the consumption culture, specific the pattern of viewership among local audience, between the growth period and the popularization period is unique from one another. Looking to the historical progress of the animation industry, animation production in the growth period were geared for children consumption, as a result, building the nationwide mentality that animation is only for children. While maintaining the ideology that animation for children, producers in the popularization begin to employ storytelling model that is friendly and inviting for adult consumption; thus, challenging the notion that animation is only for children. The result of this employment seems to be fruitful whereby local animation works receive phenomenal reception among Malaysian audience propelling the animation industry into the international stage.

I must admit that it would be quite determinative and effective to obtain data pertaining the consumption pattern of animation product in Malaysia through the lens of micro perspective as outlined by Dröge et al. (1993). However, it would be beyond my limitation and the scope of this research to undergone survey-based study targeted to significant amount of sample size to analyze consumption culture phenomenon revolving Malaysian animation product since its emergence in the 60s until the current mediascape. However, I incline to adopt Dröge et al. (1993)s' other proposal that the consumption culture phenomenon can be analyzed through the macro perspective in which external facilitating factors and socioenvironmental factor are taken into consideration. With that in mind, indicators in the form of strategic productions by animation producers (facilitating factor), national policies and incentives by government (facilitating factor), and performance of animation product in the mass market (socioenvironmental factor) are usable and relevant to unearth consumption culture toward animation product in

Malaysia. This would make my exploration much more realistic and practical at the same time capable of making profound comprehension over the subject matter.

In terms of viewership, during the emergence and growth period of the animation industry, animation works in the creative sector were heavily targeted toward children (Abdul Ghani, 2015; Daud, 2020; Muthalib, 2007). Therefore, the ongoing stigma that animation is for children had started to become prevalent in Malaysia (Chong, 2008; N. Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2013; Mohd Khalis et al., 2019; Muthalib, 2007). The culture of consumption where children audience were the majority viewers of local animated content in Malaysia is arguably catalyzed by three (3) facilitating factors. The first factor is the deeply embedded dogma within the industry that animation is an outlet for informal education for children. Since its emergence in Malaysia, animation had been prepared and produced for children consumption. The earliest animation in Malaysia, *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (The Lore of Sang Kancil, 1978), was an animated rendition of local folklore that was commonly used as an informal teaching material for children (Mamat, 2019; N. M. Saad, Kamaruzaman, & Samah, 2009). Similar ideology also can be seen in the 90s, specifically in the production of *Anak – Anak Sidek* (Sidek's Kids, 1999 – 2003) in which its narrative was based on biographical account of Malaysian badminton athletes that promotes the family value of at the same time cultivating local sense of identity (Abidin & Razak, 2003; Muthalib, 2013). Same goes with another animation, *Usop Sontorian* (1996 – 1998) that promote multi-racial harmony among domestic society to its audience (S. M. Nasir, 2021).

The second facilitating factor for the children-centric consumption of local animation is the government policies to preserve and promote Malaysian culture and values. The production of *Hikayat Sang Kancil* was conducted by Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM, National Film Department of Malaysia) which was a state-owned organization indicating that animation in Malaysia had been pioneered by government agency (S. M.

Nasir, 2021). Added with Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (DKK, National Culture Policy) in the 70s, animation as a byproduct of creative production was called upon to cultivate national culture to young audience (Halim & Abdullah, 2020). Further into the 90s, this ideology that animation is for children was strengthened due to government insistence that local animation should be produced to combat the influx of foreign animations that were targeted towards kids (Muthalib, 2007; S. M. Nasir, 2021). Because of these government interventions, animation production encouraged to be prepared for younger audience. For example, popular animation in the 90s like *Usop Sontorian* (1996 – 1998), *Kampung Boy* (Village Boy, 1997 – 2000), and *Anak – Anak Sidek* (Sidek's Kids, 1998 – 2003) were all incorporates young teenager / children as their main protagonist, arguably, an attempt to connect with targeted young audience.

The last facilitating factor that contributes to the child-centric consumption culture is the limited access in resources and expertise among local producers. Animation has been a costly venture for local producers since its beginning both in terms of technological access and human resources (M. S. Abu Bakar et al., 2020; Muthalib, 2007). Catering to adult audience might be challenging for animation producers because it would demand more resources allocated for creative process to build comprehensive narratives and to develop even more seamless and quality animation. Plus, lacking interest among adult to prefer animation over other genre in the TV and film sector of the creative industry hinders producer to invest more to target adult. In film sector, animated films were simple in treatment because they are specifically made for children (Muthalib, 2013). Datuk Lat, prominent cartoonist and creator of *Kampung Boy*, have said that embedding Malay medium into animation was purposely done so that children is attracted to consume the product (Harun & Rahim, 2010). Additionally, animation had become popular among children due to the entertaining characters (created by producers) that seems to relate greatly to young audience.

Even though animation was among the preferred entertainment outlet among children in growth period with well-known production like *Usop Sontorian*, *Kampung Boy*, and *Anak – Anak Sidek,* the popularity was only unique to the TV sector and not shared with the film sector. Unfortunately for animation producer venturing into film sector, numerous film production in animation format in the growth period suffered from loss as a result of failing to attract sufficient viewings among cinema goers. The first animation film by local producer, *Silat Lagenda* (1998, Legend of Silat) was made with RM 5 million in production cost and only managed to collect RM 141,700 in cinema ticket sales (Misfar, 1998; Safar, 2018). Similar failure also happened with other animation productions like the film *Putih* (2001) that gained about RM 400,000 as opposed to RM 2.21 million production cost, the film *Cheritera* (2001) that obtained RM 2,000 with RM 1 million production cost, and the film *Budak Lapok* (2007) that collected RM 161,000 with RM 2.59 million in production cost (Budiey, 2007; K. Ibrahim, 2001; Noob, 2015; Safar, 2018).

Compilation by Mohd Khalis et al. (2019) shown that previous to the debut of *Upin dan Ipin* animated TV series in 2007, followed by its first film production, *Upin dan Ipin: Geng Pengembaraan Bermula* in 2009, there were only 6 animated films produced by local companies and majority of them had been reported to incur loss despite producer's faith that the animation product will thrive in the film sector. Producer of *Putih* (2001), for example, expressed in the public that they had targeted RM 10 million return for the film due to the involvement of prominent local talents like Erra Fazira, Wan Maimunah, Raja Azura, Jalaluddin Hassan, Dato' M. Nasri in the production as well as its potential to be sold to an international distributor (K. Ibrahim, 2001). Sadly, the film did not perform as well as expected. Taking different turn, *Upin dan Ipin: Geng Pengembaraan Bermula* (2009) was, arguably, the first local production that has shown profit where it managed to collect RM 5 million in ticket sales only three weeks after

premiering with around RM 4 million were incurred as cost of production (mStar, 2009; Yang, 2007). It is quite logical to assumed that technology play a role in the success of *Upin dan Ipin: Pengembaraan Bermula* (2009) since its production relied of 3D rendering and its previous animated film predecessors only used 2D animation.

The idea that 3D-rendered content performed better than 2D seems reasonable because subsequent films that achieved astounding blockbuster revenue like *Upin dan Ipin: Jeng Jeng Jeng* (2016), *Upin dan Ipin: The Lone Gibbon* (2019), *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* (2016), *BoBoiBoy: The Movie 2* (2019), *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019), and *Mechamoto Movie* (2022) were all produced in 3D format (Atak, 2019; Begum, 2019b, 2023; Chua, 2016; Malaymail, 2020). However, that is not necessarily true as 3D animation, although signify better quality animation compared to 2D, – as argued by Omar and Ishak (2017), Mohd Khalis et al. (2019), and Muthalib (2013) – is not the primary reason why animation films in popularization period are thriving. If 3D technology was the main factors behind the success of animation films in popularization period, then all 3D animation films premiered after *Upin dan Ipin: Pengembaraan Bermula* (2009) should share similar success, which was not the case. *Seefood* (2012), the first english-speaking 3D animation film by Malaysian film managed to collect RM 2.36 million as opposed to RM 12 million in production cost (Ikram, 2013; Noob, 2015). Another 3D animation title *Oh LaLa* (2015) only managed to obtained RM 37,000 in ticket sales after 12 days premiering in domestic market with RM 4 million in the cost of production (Nazri, 2015). Same goes with *Bola Kampung* (2013) that managed to collect RM 610,000 with RM 5.7 million in production cost (Aman, 2013; Noob, 2015).

I incline to perceive that the storytelling format employed by producers in the popularization period plays even more critical roles in determining their product success in the media market. Specifically, producers in the popularization period have been in awareness that having a sustainable consumption culture revolving their product might

increase the value of their animation brand; thus, increasing the odds of success of their animation content in the mass consumer market. While still maintaining their focus on children as the audience, successful producers tend to develop storytelling approach that is friendly and inviting towards adult. I believe that this feat is achieved through (1) expanding the exposure of animation brand beyond film sector and (2) increasing the complexity of the storyplot so that the storylines in appealing to adult while maintaining its purpose of being produced for children viewings. I argue that the purpose of this change in storytelling paradigm is not primarily to gain, specifically, adult viewership. Rather, the new storytelling format is intended to recommend the possibility that animation film is for familial viewings to consumer; both capturing children audience as well as their parent (the adult).

This movement to reform consumer's perception that animation is not only for children but also adult serves to challenge the existing social dogma (prevalent in the growth period) that animation content can be viewed as "light" entertainment specifically for children (Abidin & Razak, 2003). Four animation brand in Malaysia, namely *Upin dan Ipin*, *BoBoiBoy*, *Ejen Ali*, and *Mechamoto* all had recorded their own phenomenal blockbuster collection in the film sector topping above domestic film production (Begum, 2019b, 2023; Chua, 2019; Malaymail, 2020; Shim, 2020). Recently premiered *Mechamoto Movie* (2022) had managed to obtained RM 33.8 million box office revenue and proceed to be the top local animation film, defeating the previous holder *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019) which obtained RM 30.05 million ticket sales collection (Begum, 2023). Interestingly, with around RM 10 million in production cost, *Mechamoto Movie* (2022) also managed to perform better domestically compared to well-known imported animation films like *Minions 2: The Rise Of Gru* (2022), *The Incredibles 2* (2018) and *How To Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* (2019) indicating local's ability to compete with foreign content in film sector (Begum, 2023; Raj, 2021).

Upin dan Ipin , *BoBoiBoy*, *Ejen Ali*, and *Mechamoto* have share similar characteristics in terms of its narrative design. It is important to note that all four brands have their own unique and distinct stories and plots with varying characters and story elements. However, the storytelling approach employed by their producers are identical in which multiple media platform are utilized to portrayed diverse set of storylines. Even further, newer animation brands like *BoBoiBoy*, *Ejen Ali*, and *Mechamoto* seems to put extra works into ensuring that each instalment that they produced contain storylines that are coherent with previous and future instalments expanding the fictional worldbuilding revolving the animation brands. As an animation franchise, *Upin dan Ipin* is developed by Les' Copaque Production and begin to be aired as a TV series in 2007. The franchise is primarily consisting of TV series instalment spanning for 16 seasons with over 500 episodes, 3 blockbuster movies beginning with *Upin dan Ipin: Pengembaraan Bermula* (2008), followed by *Upin dan Ipin: Jeng Jeng Jeng* (2016), and *Upin dan Ipin: The Lone Gibbon* (2019). The franchise itself is not limited to screen format as it also encompasses comic book, theme parks, and mobile games (A. Aziz, 2009; Itar, 2009; Mahdi, Yunos, & Yusoff, 2019; N. A. Razak, 2011).

BoBoiBoy and *Mechamoto* are both animation franchises developed by Animosta Studio (alternatively Monsta Studio). *BoBoiBoy* begin as a TV series that started to be aired in 2011. The show ended with 3 seasons encompassing 52 episodes only to be continued with its sequel TV series *BoBoiBoy Galaxy* which currently consist of a single season with 26 episodes (Othman, 2016; N. Razak & Aziz, 2016). The film instalment of the franchise consist of 2 cinematic movies titled *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* (2016) and *BoBoiBoy: The Movie 2* (2019) both achieved among top grossing domestic films during their premiering (Begum, 2019a; Mazalan, 2016). *Mechamoto,* on the other hand, is a newer franchise produced by Animonsta Studio. While it shares the same storyworld with *BoBoiBoy*, *Mechamoto* is considered separate franchise as it has its own narrative

consisting multiple storylines that are portrayed in TV series format (currently only available for a single season spanning 13 episodes beginning in 2021 and ended in 2022) and a cinematic film format titled *Mechamoto Movie* (2022) (Agency, 2022). Both franchises also encompass creative product made available across several media format including comic books, digital games, card game, and theme park (Asia, 2018; Chin, 2015; Hanif, 2017; TheStar, 2022a).

Ejen Ali is produced by Wau Animation and Primeworks Studio, a media firm specializing in content business (Gun, 2016). Different from the rest of its competitor, *Ejen Ali* is the first animation franchise owned by large media conglomerate known as Media Prima Berhad signifying the lucrativeness of animation business in Malaysia particularly with the multi-platform storytelling format. Like its predecessor, *Ejen Ali* begins with its TV series first aired in 2016 and currently available for 3 seasons with 39 episodes. Apart of the TV series instalment, *Ejen Ali* also available in cinematic film format titled *Ejen Ali: The Movie* which was premiered in 2019 (Shim, 2020). The franchise also includes in several other media format such as comic book, trading card, board games, and mobile games (Singh, 2016; TheStar, 2020). Interestingly, *Ejen Ali* is the first that include in e-sport program, *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena Tournament,* into its franchise indicating the producers' commitment to multi-platform storytelling format (Team, 2021).

Efforts by producers engaging with multi-platform storytelling to build an animation franchise in the animation industry serves as a facilitating factor the shift in consumption culture revolving animation film. Consistent with Jenkins (2007) thought in the pursuit of theorizing transmedia storytelling, the availability of multiple product (spanning across various media platform) create the potential of multiple points of entry for general media consumer to engage with the franchise; thus, increasing the exposure of the content. This exposure, arguably, invite consumer's group other than children,

particularly the parent, to be acquainted with the brand of the franchise. In the case of *Upin dan Ipin*, the initial exposure in the form of TV series format motivates audience (both children and adult, arguably in familial setting) to engage further with the franchise catalyzing the popularity of the upcoming instalment in film format (Kamarudin & Sajilan, 2013). This method propels animation product in film sector to topple other domestic film production. Case in point, *Ejen Ali: The Movie* managed to win best box office film awards in Malaysia's 31st Festival Film Award Ceremony (Anugerah Festival Filem Malaysia ke-31, 2021) indicating that animation, although known for children viewing, managed to be mainstreamed familial consumption preference for Malaysian audience (Mahmud, 2020; Penaklasik, 2021).

In addition, having exposures to media consumers before the premiere of the film instalment provide a form of investment security to the producers because filmmaking especially for animation production is very costly. Nizam Razak, chief executive officer of Monsta Studio, admitted that establishing fan base from the *BoBoiBoy* TV series help them managed the risk of steep investment in Industry players, having made aware that animation is a costly venture, realize that promoting of producing *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* in 2016 (HarianMetro, 2012). The result from this method of exposure, arguably, contribute to the diversity of audience in the aspect of age group. Interestingly for *BoBoiBoy*, 60 percents of its viewers are consists of 14 to 35 years old audience (AstroAWANI, 2019). Industry players are now confident on the idea that animation is for adult consumption might increase the demand of the animation product in film sector. An agency known as Malaysian Animation Educators Society (Persatuan Pendidik Animasi Malaysia, PPAM) have launched a motto "animation for all" signifying their campaign to instill the idea that animation should not be restricted to children to local consumer (TheStar, 2022b).

In addition to the exposure, the development of plot in the storytelling process are also being paid attention to ensure it satisfy the demand of a audience with wider set of age group. Therefore, increasing the complexity of the narrative as it is portrayed in multiple media formats is becoming mainstreamed among producers. This is achieved by providing various ways audience can engage with the animation franchise. Nizam as CEO of Monsta Studio mentioned that his teams purposely strategize in establishing multiple media products revolving *BoBoiBoy* franchise available in TV series format, cinematic films, and theme parks to extend audience experience in enjoying their animation brand (Amanz, 2016). Audience not only entertained when consuming various media outlet, they may also learn about *BoBoiBoy's* brand; further strengthen this franchise value in the consumer market.

Nizam also realizes the importance of narrative construction for every instalments within *BoBoiBoy* franchise (Sherene, 2017). To be specific, making coherent storylines in all instalments within the animation franchise also part of the production strategy as it motivates the fan activity; in return, maintaining audience attention over the franchise for the long run. For *BoBoiBoy*, the fictional storyworld is made to be expandable as the franchise grows allowing each instalment to be in relation to another making the narrative of the whole animation franchise dynamic (Othman, 2016). However, the executives also expressed that although these instalments are in coherent with one another in terms of storytlines, *BoBoiBoy's* production teams puts in the effort to make sure that each instalment is standalone and can be enjoyed without having to consumed the previous instalment (Afiqah, 2019). Similar tactics has been seen in *Ejen Ali* franchise whereby the plot of the cinematic film is related to the plot portrayed in the TV series format, yet without watching the TV series does not greatly affect the experience of consuming the film (Gun, 2018; Zahar, 2022).

In the growth period of the industrialization of the Malaysian animation industry, the production animation film like *Silat Lagenda* (1998) and *Putih* (2001) are influenced the existing paradigm that is animation is solely for children as I have argued above. Additionally, the industrial standard of using folklore and local scenery as the basis of the storylines in animation resulting from seeing animation as an informal means of education to children have created a consumption culture in which children (as the main consumer of animation) favor TV series format rather than cinematic film format. Combating the failing trends of local animation film premieres, local producers in the popularization period started a movement, acting as external facilitator, to reform the consumption culture revolving animation in cinematic film format. By treating animation works as a franchise rather than solely produce independent animation film, these producers increase the exposure of the brand in the pursuits inviting wider subset of consumer in terms of age group to the product, arguably, shifting the consumption culture from children-centric viewership towards familial viewership in film sector. Additionally, by increasing the complexity of narrative design for their animation franchise, consumption of animated content is not restricted to one medium. Rather, the franchise can be consumed and engaged through multiple media outlets, further strengthening the value of animation franchise in the domestic consumer's market. Recent successes of franchise engaging with this storytelling model like *Upin dan Ipin, BoBoiBoy, Ejen Ali,* and *Mechamoto* may signify a potential of more productions being made through similar practices in the future.

In conclusion, this chapter serves to provide readers with the necessary context for understanding the scope and significance of the qualitative case study research conducted on the *Ejen Ali* animation franchise. It is essential for readers to grasp this contextual framework to ensure that the subsequent analysis of data in the research results chapters is effectively grounded within specified boundaries. The three sub-chapters within this chapter introduce key contextual elements: the history of storytelling in

Malaysia and the emergence of storytelling as a commercial venture, the evolution of the Malaysian animation industry, and the shifting consumption culture surrounding locally produced animation products. Each of these contexts shed light on different aspects relevant to the development and reception of the *Ejen Ali* franchise, setting the stage for deeper exploration in the following chapters. With these contextual foundations in place, readers are prepared to delve into discussions on transmedia entertainment format and worldbuilding in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: TRANSMEDIA AND WORLDBUILDING

This chapter serves the purpose of conducting a literature review on the theoretical position of transmedia storytelling, coupled with its associated worldbuilding theory. The ensuing discussions will delve into the conceptual foundations and critical perspectives that form the basis of these theoretical frameworks, thereby contextualizing their relevance within the scope of the study. The chapter begins by outlining that the proliferation of multiple media platforms, driven by the forces of popular culture, has ushered in a paradigm shift. This paradigm emphasizes the aesthetic dimensions of storytelling, positing that engagement with the audience necessitates a focus on the artistic and expressive elements of narratives, beyond mere economic considerations.

Emphasizing the importance of aesthetic considerations, this discussion will provide arguments that this shift in perspective have propel the significance of transmedia storytelling theory particularly among popular works in global narrative entertainment industry. These transmedia features are made possible by strategic worldbuilding to establish a fictional universe equipped with comprehensive narrative environment capable of sustaining multiple storylines across various platforms. The subsequent sections will expound upon the intricate relationship between transmedia storytelling, aesthetic dimensions, and worldbuilding, highlighting their combined impact on audience engagement and narrative complexity.

In this regard, the forthcoming sections will undertake a comprehensive exploration of the core concepts underpinning transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding. This exploration aims to crystallize these theoretical frameworks, providing a conceptual basis that will inform and guide the subsequent phases of the case study. The theoretical definitions and elucidations presented in this chapter will be instrumental in shaping the methodological approach adopted in the ensuing stages of the research.

3.1   Popular culture and adoption of multiple media platforms

Popular culture has been understood in various ways. Storey (2018) proposed to view popular culture as a cultural forms and practices that are widely circulated and consumed by a diverse range of people. This would be consistent with Fiske (2001) argument that popular culture can be seen as a cultural artifacts and practices that are created, consumed and experienced by large number of people in everyday life. Additionally, Storey further explained that popular culture is dynamic and constantly evolving set of cultural believe in a way that it reflects and shapes the values, beliefs, and desires of a particular society or social group (Storey, 2018). To an extent, Storey (2018) even argued that popular culture have the capacity to influence the way people make sense of their world, negotiate their identity and engage with social and political issues. Looking at Japan's cultural products revolving Manga and Anime industries, Storey's thought on popular culture seems to be well articulated. Studies have shown that communities (or fans) within the Anime and Manga industries have shaped their individual belief and group identities through intense fandom – sometime known as "Otaku" culture – revolving a specified anime or manga titles (Allison, 2003; Azuma, 2009; MacWilliams, 2014).

Popular culture and storytelling are two concepts that, when mixed, make a lucrative business model in cultural and creative industry. In recent years, popular culture dictates the growth of content fueled by consumers tendency to consume content and its repurposed and remodified version. As the content becomes more popular, its followings and audienceship become stronger, forming a community known as fandom. Jenkins (2006) posited that the fandom revolving popular text, or "knowledge community", have tendency to involve in a discourse over their shared interest retaining their attention to the text for the long run. Media firms stand to benefit from this ordeal as their products are becoming more valuable as this fandom grows, inviting more investment into the business. Marvel entertainment, for example, has enjoyed phenomenal profit in the past

several decades even though their product has been through numerous reproduction and remodification. This goes to show that storytelling, done effectively, can be a powerful means of economic profit fueled by popular culture.

The digital age poses an unprecedented impact toward the global cultural and creative industry. In general sense, this industry is concerned with the industrialization of content which primarily involves businesses that produce, market or sell products in the category of or related to the creative arts. Digital technology has enabled computing functionalities to be applied in the business of content in a holistic manner; thus, allowing the production, dissemination, and reception of content far more cost-effective and efficient. As these processes further improvised, the economy surrounding the industry grew at a phenomenal rate, birthing mega conglomerate specialized in media products.

The advent of digital atmosphere in the cultural and creative industry also enables content to be more fluid across a wide range of media. The current mediascape provides a nurturing environment for existing content to be re-purposed and re-produced from one medium to another on an industrial level as long as it is economically viable. This method is lucrative among content producers because re-purposed content seems to have better chance of success in the market as it already has existing audience, those that consume the prior rendition of the content. Additionally, this model also advantageous in promoting new instalment as the marketing effort for awareness is already subsidized by the previous iteration of the content (Kim & Hong, 2013).

Experts on cultural industry have proposed OSMU (One-Source Multi-Use) model to illustrate producers' tendency to re-purpose an existing content in a new medium. Disney, as a mega conglomerate on the global cultural and creative industry, have actively invested in into this model in recent years. Chung and Ju (2016) have argued that Disney employ OSMU model to hyper-optimize their ownership over various intellectual property by reusing and transforming existing content into other form of

popular media with minimized payment on licensing and royalties. With OSMU, Disney has been aggressively acquiring multiple popular franchises like Marvel entertainment and Lucas film to expand their economic dominance over the cultural industry. The OSMU model describes that media corporations are motivated to repurpose existing content into various popular media to expand their product lines in a cost-effective and efficient way.

OSMU model recognize, primarily, that corporate merger and acquisition as an effective way of multiplatform franchise such in the case of Disney and their acquisition on Marvel entertainment (Chung & Ju, 2016; Kim & Hong, 2013). The ability to resell establish property, or "repurposing", is an essential economic strategy (Klinger, 2006, p. 8). Ndalianis (2004, p. 41) tend to agree with OSMU philosophy in describing the phenomenon of strategic repurposing among media conglomerate as she suggested that the cross-media nature of these repurposed material is "the outcome of a marketing strategy that aims at squeezing from a product its fullest marketing potential". She also added that further economic benefits will be on the table for corporation that owns subsidiary companies that specialize in serializing a story franchise whereby the potential profit across corporation's multiple investments interest (i.e. each commercial repurposed material) is greatly extended (Ndalianis, 2004).

Different from OSMU, transmedia storytelling paradigm offers a much more versatile description of the current trend in multiple media productions in popular culture. Transmedia storytelling has become a defining feature of contemporary popular culture, shaping how stories are created, consumed, and experienced in the digital age. The concept, which involves telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats, has significant implications for audience engagement, production strategies, and cultural discourse.

One of the critical dimensions of transmedia storytelling is its close relationship with fan participatory culture, which offers a comprehensive understanding of audience behaviour in the current era of media convergence. According to Jenkins (2006), participatory culture reflects the strength of fan activities in driving the popularity of a media franchise, especially those that engage with transmedia storytelling. Fans are no longer passive consumers; they actively participate in the creation and dissemination of content, blurring the lines between production and consumption. In transmedia environments, fans often contribute by creating fan fiction, producing fan art, participating in online communities, and sharing interpretations and analyses. This active engagement not only fosters a deeper connection between the audience and the media franchise but also enhances the visibility and reach of the content. As a result, participatory culture becomes a powerful force that shapes popular culture, reinforcing the importance of understanding fan dynamics in the context of transmedia storytelling.

Transmedia storytelling also plays a crucial role in negotiating the relationship between production processes and audience demand in the creation of cultural texts. Schiller (2018) argues that transmedia storytelling facilitates diverse discussions on popular culture by accommodating a wide range of audience expectations and preferences. This negotiation process can lead to the emergence of new forms of storytelling that reflect the desires of both creators and consumers. For example, the use of multiple platforms allows creators to explore different narrative perspectives, styles, and formats, offering audiences a more immersive and interactive experience. At the same time, it provides a space for fans to express their interpretations and contribute to the story world, thus democratizing the production process and fostering a dynamic dialogue between media producers and consumers.

While transmedia storytelling provides creative and aesthetic benefits, it also presents significant financial incentives that drive its growth. Bolin (2007) points out that transmedia storytelling encourages consumers to engage with multiple platforms rather than relying on a single medium, which increases the potential for revenue generation. This approach forces consumers to navigate across different formats to fully understand the story, promoting customer loyalty and engagement. In a multi-channel media environment where audiences have access to an almost infinite variety of texts, building audience loyalty is crucial for the media sector. Strategies such as transmedia storytelling and serialization capitalize on the commodification of communication forms within a profit-driven commercial market. By compelling consumers to interact with various media types, transmedia storytelling maximizes the commercial value of popular culture texts, turning audience engagement into a lucrative endeavour.

However, the convergence of media resulting from transmedia storytelling has also generated anxiety among media professionals concerning narrative production and the legitimacy of amateur content derived from popular culture texts. Von Stackelberg and Jones (2014) highlight the tension between professional content creators and amateur contributors, as the latter's activities challenge the credibility and authority of traditional narrative expressions. The rise of fan-generated content, such as fan fiction and unofficial sequels, often blurs the boundaries between authorized and unauthorized storytelling, raising questions about ownership, originality, and authenticity. This challenge to narrative authority can create conflicts between fans and creators, as professionals may perceive fan contributions as a threat to their creative control and intellectual property. Nonetheless, these anxieties also underscore the evolving nature of storytelling in a digital age, where boundaries between producers and consumers are increasingly fluid and contested.

A distinguishing feature of transmedia storytelling is its versatility in repurposing content from one medium to another, setting it apart from traditional adaptation models. According to Scolari (2009), transmedia storytelling involves a structured complexity in textual dispersion, making it a significant source of popular culture. Unlike traditional adaptations that typically move a narrative from one medium to another (e.g., a book to a film), transmedia storytelling expands a narrative across multiple platforms simultaneously, each contributing uniquely to the overall story. This approach creates a layered, multifaceted experience for audiences, allowing them to explore different aspects of the story world through various media. For instance, a television show may be complemented by a video game, a comic book series, and an interactive website, each offering distinct elements that enrich the overall narrative. This multiplicity not only enhances the depth and complexity of storytelling but also reflects the diverse ways in which contemporary audiences consume and engage with popular culture.

In summary, transmedia storytelling has become a vital framework within popular culture, redefining how narratives are produced, distributed, and experienced. It aligns closely with the principles of participatory culture, enabling fans to play an active role in shaping and expanding story worlds. It also fosters a negotiation between production processes and audience demands, allowing for more diverse cultural expressions. The financial incentives associated with transmedia storytelling further reinforce its appeal to media producers, while its versatility in repurposing content opens up new creative possibilities. However, it also presents challenges to traditional notions of authorship and narrative authority, highlighting the complexities and contradictions of contemporary cultural production. As popular culture continues to evolve in the digital age, transmedia storytelling remains a powerful tool for engaging audiences and shaping the cultural landscape.

3.2   Transmedia storytelling

The phenomenon of which a cultural property is commercially repurposed for economic purposes is logical and convincing. However, I want to make a case that repurposing, as an economic instrument, cannot be truly successful in the mass market without considering its creative aspect. While it is a lucrative and impactful business model, the acts of using multiple platforms to expand a story franchise should also consider the way it is aesthetically implemented. Jenkins (2006) pointed out that progress in the cultural industry in terms of digitization and computerization have catalyzed movement, known as convergence, among corporations in which mixing-and-matching various medium into one entertainment model is a natural and sought-after move.

While this method is fuelled by economic incentives (similarly argued in OSMU model), the core idea behind this movement, proposed by Jenkins (2006) is to cater to audience's behaviour and demand in the digital age. With increasing number of media platforms, media consumers in cultural industry are bombarded with options on where they want to consume information resulting in hyper-segmented market (Smith, 2018b). With that, providing an entertainment experience with just one medium is not sufficient and not optimized for a successful yield in the cultural industry. According to convergence logic, media corporations must understand how hyper-segmented audiences in the digital age consume content from various outlets, and with that knowledge, construct an entertainment franchise surrounding that consumption behaviour. Additionally, media corporation also have to acknowledge that audience in the convergence age is motivated by narrative depth, allowing them to enjoy gathering material substance from a fictional storyworld (Jenkins, 2006).

Considering audience is hyper segmented and motivated by narrative depth, I argue that catering to audience's demand motivates producers to consider and emphasize the aesthetic aspect of their repurposed products so that desirable reception can be

achieved in the mass market. This notion is supported through Jenkins (2006) proposal that the concept of transmedia storytelling is a better fitting term to describe the current production logic of using multiple platforms to portray a story franchise. In his effort to articulate his description on the phenomenon of media convergence, Jenkins (2006) makes a case that the fluidity of content across various medium, resulting from convergence logic have a profound influence over popular culture storytelling.

Henry Jenkins proposed the term "transmedia storytelling" to describe a content production strategy in which a set of narrative is dispersed into several story arcs individually prepared for a predetermined yet various media formats with each instalment is a standalone at the same time providing narrative value to the whole overarching narrative (Jenkins 2003, Para. 10). Transmedia storytelling as a concept had become a prevalent scholarly theory used by researchers to analyze the growing popularity of pop culture works, especially those that involve multi-platforms production throughout the globe such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Brundige, 2015; Menard, 2015; Richter, 2016), the Star Wars Universe (Guynes & Hassler-Forest, 2018; Wakeman, n.d), the Dr Who Universe (Perryman, 2008), and Harry Potter Universe (Brindley, 2019; Brummitt, 2016; Schiller, 2018).

Transmedia storytelling as proposed by Jenkins might offer a comprehensive theoretical concept to analyse current movement of adopting multiple platforms to expand a story franchise. This is because while transmedia storytelling acknowledges that economic factors remain a strong motivation for this production logic, it puts more emphasis towards narrative features of these multi-platform story franchises. Further into this thought, the transmedia storytelling model not only serves to describe features of any story franchise that uses multiple platforms, but also to provide criteria to determine the quality of said franchise. Jenkins (2003) had criticized that production logic imitating "repurposing" or "OSMU model" put too much weight on the franchising aspect of the

production activity which are governed too much by economic logic. Consequently, the value and potential of story franchise will deteriorate as redundant works, new rendition of a cultural property without significant narrative value embedded in the output, will flood the market. As Jenkins (2006, p. 96) had noted " redundancy burns up fan interest and caused franchise to fail".

Transmedia storytelling model recognize that audience in the current convergence age craves new works to provide "new insight into the characters and new experiences of the fictional world" (Jenkins, 2003, para 7). With that recognition, franchising a story without consideration of the aesthetic aspects of the storytelling will bore its existing audience. Hence, transmedia storytelling model can determine the value of that new work within a story franchise by analysing the narrative extension it offers in relation to the whole story. Jenkins's model on transmedia storytelling outlined conditions of which a story franchise can be considered as an effective transmedia narrative.

> "In an ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 96)

Using Jenkins's model, a transmedia narrative should, first, encompass multiple instalments in which each works is optimally produced based on its given platform. Secondly, all instalments must contain additional and expanded narrative material to be enjoyed by its fan. And lastly, each work (or instalment) within a transmedia narrative should be prepared as a standalone and acts as a viable point of entry for new audiences to immerse into the storyworld.

There are a number of scholars agree that the aesthetic appeal of a story franchise should be highlighted in the process of its expansion. Ito (2005, p. 4) asserts that linking content from various instalment within a story franchise is important to establish a citational network called "media mix". For Weaver (2013), transmedia storytelling is about empowering audience with choice on how deep they want to be entertained with the storyworld as each instalment must be a standalone, yet unfolding new story elements to its viewers. Both Ito's (2005) and Weaver's (2013) thought posed an important aspect of a transmedia story which is the interlinking feature between various instalments within the franchise. As Ruppel (2012, p. 62) have suggested, this interlinking feature formulate "migratory cues" that incentivizes audience from one instalment to consume another within the franchise. Taking lesson from these scholars, I find it convincing that developing a transmedia narrative (that spanned across various media platforms) as a means of franchise expansion increase the economic potential of said franchise by capturing new audience through wide range of entry points and sustaining existing fans with interlinked stories as well as narrative depth involving multiple creative products that can be enjoyed various ways (depending on modes and affordances offered by given media platforms).

Considering various mega story franchises like Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Star Wars Universe, Harry Potter's The Wizarding World, DC Extended Universe (DCEU), and Dr Who Universe, the use of multiple platforms to expand a story franchise is a natural course for media corporations that seek economic benefits over a cultural product. Additionally, the demand of audience in the convergence age requires these corporations to put in efforts to ensure that their expansion (in the form of various instalment over various media format) is relevant to the mass market and sustainable for future profitability. As argued above, transmedia storytelling helps a story franchise to be

relevant and sustainable for future progress. But it is undeniable that repurposed works without the adoption of transmedia storytelling philosophy is still relevant and profitable.

For example, within DC Comic, the 'Batman' as cultural properties have been repurposed in numerous cinematic films in the past decades. Christopher Nolen's *The Dark Knight* trilogy, with Christian Bale playing Batman, consisting of *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) is a standalone works without connection into any overarching narratives. Several years after, the new Batman played by Ben Affleck appears in *Batman vs Superman* (2016), *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Justice League* (2017) and *The Flash* (2023) as part of an ongoing expansion of the DCEU indication a transmedia storytelling in play. Taking a different route, the latest *The Batman* (2023) starring Robert Pattison with a storyplot unrelated to DCEU was released to the public making it repurposed cultural properties without transmedia storytelling element. This is consistent with Jenkins's (2004) thought that even though transmedia storytelling seems to be a profitable venture, not all media franchise will adopt its philosophy.

While advocate for multi-platform approach, Jenkins (2006) also emphasizes textual and narrative importance on the process of franchise expansion. Particularly, transmedia storytelling approach requires the authorship of the texts to be coordinated, making sure that each component is "making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" franchise (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95-96). Early in his pursuit of theorizing transmedia storytelling, Jenkins (2003) argued about the relevance of seeing transmedia narratives from the aesthetics point of view rather that solely treating this phenomenon as a biproduct of economic interest by media conglomerate.

Jenkins (2011) further reaffirm his point of view of making sure that narrative is more important for transmedia storytelling by distinguishing new texts as either a more desirable extension or the should-be-avoided adaptation. The former refers to text that expand the story and contribute to the overall grand narrative and the latter refers to a repurposed work (although may be created in the different format) that does not contain valuable and additional materials regarding the overarching narrative. Long (2007, p. 24) also agrees and states that "while adaptation…may serve as a component of a branded franchise, adaptations do not stand as distinct component of some larger shared narrative arc". From this perspective, transmedia storytelling place value to each component that have narrative contributions towards a larger and overarching narrative.

However, I want to point out that Jenkins's notion on valuable contribution – especially in terms of the distinction between extension and adaptation – is rather ambiguous. Perhaps it is clear that in terms of narrative, a component of transmedia story can provide additional material that may provide information about the overall grand narrative. Menard (2015), for example, showcase that bit of information regarding the overall grand arc of Infinity Stone in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) exists in many components of the franchise including several film instalments, TV series productions, and comic book publication. However, I argue that non-narrative component such as action figure, amusement park and themed restaurant does not have the capacity to host a set of narrative; thus, their narrative contribution to overall grand narrative is questionable.

Jenkins (2010) clarifies that non-narrative component can be valuable for branded transmedia narrative as it offers immersion and extractability elements to its audience. Amusement park or installation of virtual environment representing a certain brand of narrative provide audience with new and various ways of interacting with narrative elements signalling immersion as per Jenkins's (2010) standard. Concurrently, ability for

audience to purchase and obtain action figure represents extractability in which audience are given opportunity to engage physically and appreciate the aesthetics of in-universe characters of a transmedia story. While they are valuable to the franchise, the fact that this non-narrative component does not host any narrative that can contribute to overall grand narrative pose a question whether they are considered as an adaptation or an extension?

Instead of delving further into the abyss of extension vs adaptation, I want to refocus the conceptual framework for this study by reshaping the idea of valuable contribution among components in a set of transmedia narrative. I am more convinced with Mark J. P. Wolf (2014, p. 245) that "adaptation" and "growth" (similar to extension) are different ways a transnarrative can be transmedial; therefore, a valuable component to a branded transmedia narrative.

> More recently, a cultural phenomenon known as transmedia storytelling…has combined these two forms, so that we now have "franchises" such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, or *Lord of the Rings* that include both adaptations and transfictional expansions using any of the media capable of narration, as well as some non-media objects such as T-Shirts, Lego sets, and costumes that can be used by fans as "props in games of make-believe… (Ryan, 2017, p. 38)

It is not necessary for audience to consume all component of transmedia story to experience enjoyment as each component should be self-contained and standalone (Jenkins, 2003). Ryan (2017, p. 39) points out that audience may typically consume the major components of a transmedia franchise, which she refers to as "Mother Ship". But for those who have strong interest with the storyworld have the option to consume other transmedia documents as a peripheral element to deepen their immersion (ibid).

I believe that it is more effective for this study to recognize that that the main challenge of constructing transmedia story lies in maintaining relevance and engagement across these different mediums, ensuring that each component resonates with the audience. Moreover, I assert that worldbuilding provide an effective space to derive and enhance individual component's value regardless of media format. Jenkins (2010) articulates that worldbuilding (world-making) as part of transmedia storytelling is responsible towards invoking pleasure of reading and making sense of physical and cultural geography of a fictional storyworld that is portrayed across various texts in varying media form. At the same time, worldbuilding ensure the storyworld is depicted with sufficient consistency that each instalment is "recognizably part of the whole with enough flexibility that it can be rendered" in different style of representations (Jenkins, 2006, p. 113).

While worldbuilding enhance a transmedia component's value by embedding elements (bits of information about the storyworld) that audience can enjoy discovering during consumption, it also ensures its narrative consistency in relations to other component in a set of transmedia stories. Additionally, worldbuilding can enhance immersion for each transmedia component. While audience can enjoy the standalone plot and storyline, the utilization of unified storyworld enable audience to immerse deeper into the transmedia franchise. Roine (2016) supports this idea and makes a case that worldbuilding essentially is an immersive entertainment, a form of storytelling that transports its audience to intricately designed realms. Within these imaginative spaces of "speculative worldbuilding" (Roine, 2016, p. 33), the boundaries of reality fade, allowing for fresh experiences to unfold where the fictional world may act as proxy to our mundane reality. In this captivating environment, consumers become fully engrossed, leaving behind the routine of their daily lives, as they invest countless hours exploring and making sense of these entirely fictional universes.

3.3   Emphasis into worldbuilding

Paving the way into the theoretical understanding towards transmedia storytelling, Jenkins (2006) visits *The Matrix* franchise and uncovers its transmedia nature. He asserts that there are two basic ideas behind transmedia storytelling strategy employed by the creator to develop *The Matrix* as a media franchise. First, the creators used collaborative and synergistic storytelling where different parties specialized in a certain media platform will each have autonomy to produce an instalment in their own respective platform to expand the franchise at the same time coordinated their own storylines between each other so that everything inline as a unified story. Therefore, storylines in the game instalment, the animated content instalment and the film instalments are consistent with one another although every instalment has its own unique plot. Secondly, Jenkins (2006, p. 113) argues that *The Matrix* as a transmedia narrative relies on the "art of world-making" and to make sure that the fictional storyworld encompassing the franchise is expandable and immersible. At the same time, an element called "additive comprehension" is strategically inserted in the franchise where new narrative element is embedded into every new instalment to ensure that the storyworld is consistently expanded (Jenkins, 2006, p. 123).

Long (2007) proposed a similar yet unique approach on his own to analyse transmedia storytelling phenomenon. While Long (2007) agrees on the definition of transmedia storytelling proposed by Jenkins, he puts more emphasis towards the notion of worldbuilding (Jenkins refer to as "art of worldmaking") in his exploration towards the concept. He conducted a case study on Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* (1986) and *The Dark Crystal* (1982) as a subject of transmedia narrative. He proposed that a transmedia narrative is developed with an interplay between worldbuilding, negative capability and migratory cues. For Long (2007), worldbuilding, essentially, is the way a storyworld is built considering that it will sustain several storylines prepared to be produced/published across various platforms. The insertion of negative capabilities element, which is a

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mystery element that invoke question to audience in the individual instalment spark a migratory cue that motivate audience to consume another instalment that answer the previous question audience had in mind. Thus, expanding the storyworld with additional instalment can still be profitable since this additional instalment will optimize the use of negative capability and migratory cue to keep audience consuming more content.

For Menard (2015) and Richter (2016), worldbuilding is also an important element to transmedia storytelling. Their exploration toward Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) as a prime example of transmedia storytelling suggests that worldbuilding ensure multiple instalments within a story franchise is kept consistent and coherent with one another. Richter (2006) even agree to Jenkins other description on transmedia storytelling which suggest that the worldbuilding element allow audience to immerse into the storyworld through finding bits of information across varying media product to makes sense of the fictional world. Menards on the other hand agree with Long (2007) that worldbuilding serve to tie in various instalment into a cohesive storyworld and its elements can be explored through visiting passing references from one instalment toward other instalment in the forms of a Bartisian hermeneutic code like characters, philosophy, event, place and science. Menard also adds that the relationship between instalment regardless of any media format can be strengthened through additive comprehension as suggested by Henry Jenkins (2006).

I am convinced that the essence of transmedia phenomenon is the construction of a fictional storyworld capable of sustaining multiple narratives across several media formats achieve through worldbuilding (Jenkins, 2007; Menard, 2015). While worldbuilding provides opportunity for growth, a well-built storyworld serves as foundation for transmedia narrative to be coherent despite consisting of numerous standalone works. Additionally, worldbuilding helps to embed narrative depth to each encompassing stories for the purpose of providing a richer entertainment experience to

its audience. This is because the establishment of storyworld as the byproduct of worldbuilding would provide necessary space for strategies like negative capability, additive comprehension, and migratory cue can play their respective roles.

Within its raw ideology, worldbuilding represents a process of creating a fictional world. This concept is often used by contemporary scholars to describe the proliferation of multi-platform storytelling in the form of transmedia narrative in popular culture (see Brindley, 2019; Brundige, 2015; Hassler-Forest, 2017; Jenkins & Hassler-Forest, 2017). While I agree that worldbuilding and storytelling goes hand in hand especially in the case of transmedia storytelling, I also want to emphasize the importance of worldbuilding and its aesthetics when it comes to the development of a transmedia franchise. This is because worldbuilding is a unique creative process on its own. Even without storytelling, worldbuilding alone is a sufficient literary model of which a commercial works can be built upon. There are some notable cultural works that lean on worldbuilding paradigm rather than portraying a set of stories.

As part of a multi millions dollar franchise covering mainly the print and film industry, a well-endowed author, J.R.R. Tolkien, released a book called *The Silmarillion* (1977). This work delves into the mythology, history, and cultures of Middle earth, providing a comprehensive background for Tolkien's famous *Lord of the Rings* series. Another example would be Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series where he includes extensive background material on the Galactic Empire, psychohistory, and the various planets and societies within his science fiction universe. Other than that, various tabletop role-playing game (RPG) sourcebooks for example games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Star Wars: Edge of the Empire* produce sourcebooks that provide detailed information about the game worlds, including histories, creatures, and cultures.

Worldbuilding is an important aspect of transmedia storytelling as it is perceived to play a key role in the construction of a fictional storyworld with sufficient complexity to sustain several storylines depicted in diverse media format (Freeman, 2017; Jenkins, 2006). However, the scholarship on worldbuilding practices and theories is not without issue. While many scholars agree that worldbuilding represent a process of creating fictional world (see Freeman, 2017; Jenkins, 2006; Long, 2007; Ryan, 2017; Wolf, 2014), articulation over the process can be in varying perspectives. This varying perspective can be illustrated by seeing worldbuilding as a shared activity or interest that forms relationship between author and audience.

> Another explanation for the existence of possible worlds situates their origin in an act of the mind, such as imagining, dreaming, hallucinating or producing fictions. If one applies this conception of possible worlds to narrative fiction, fictional worlds will be created by the mind of authors for the benefit of audiences. Readers, spectators, or players relocate themselves into these worlds through their imagination, pretending that they are actual (Ryan, 2017, pp. 33-34)

On one end of the relationship is the author who originates the creation of a fictional universe and formulates its depiction across multiple works. And the other end is the audience who interprets the works and formulates their own understandings about the fictional universe.

If I want to consider worldbuilding as a mental activity, as argued by Ryan (2013) and Bertetti (2017), then I posit that both author and audience maintain a degree of autonomy over the creation of the universe. The author would have a clear autonomy over the creation of the storyworld as they imagine and originate the physical and social construct of their own fictional universe. But for the audience, the autonomy is shown through their engagement with any of the components in a transmedia franchise. In a

much more recent writing, Jenkins (2017, para 1) points audience may use extractable component of transmedia franchise such as action figure and use them as an "authoring tools" where they can "faithfully (and playfully) retell the events of the original narrative, may rework them, and may even mix and match characters across different franchises to create a new crossover story".

However, treating worldbuilding as a creative pursuit limits the autonomy of constructing the storyworld only to the author or at least asserts a degree of authority upon the way this storyworld is depicted across multiple works. While worldbuilding is a mental activity, authors have control over how their storyworld unfolds and realizes in various works within the franchise.

> The Wachowski brothers didn't simply license or subcontract and hope for the best. The *(then)* brothers personally wrote and directed content for the game, drafted scenarios for some of the animated shorts, and co-wrote a few of the comics. For fans, their personal engagement made these other *Matrix* texts a central part of the "canon." (Jenkins, 2006, p. 111)

It is undeniable that the audience may create their own rendition of the fictional universe in the form of fan art; thus showing (again) their autonomy on the worldbuilding aspect of transmedia franchise. However, the notion of "canon" as mentioned above shows that when it comes to creative pursuit, works originated from the author are considered more authentic and authoritative compared to works from other sources although they share the same storyworld.

Moreover, understanding it as a creative pursuit indicates that worldbuilding is an ongoing process. Everything imagined, resulting from worldbuilding exercise, is not necessarily depicted in a given amount of time. The author has to make a decision on which worldbuilding element to showcase in a given instalment. Therefore with new text or transmedia components are published or produced to the media market, additional

information on the storyworld can be portrayed making the creation of fictional world as a creative venture "inevitably incomplete" (Wolf, 2014, p. 19). As Ryan (2017) has pointed out that worldbuilding is a form of aesthetics representing the proliferation of narrative works particularly in the form of textual and medial. Based on this, I want to make a case that as worldbuilding commits to showcase its complete form/structure, it further derives the expansion of transmedia narrative birthing many components to be released for public consumption.

Ryan (2017) understands the significance of seeing worldbuilding as a creative pursuit as she argues that building a transmedia story should be planned top-down so that audience should be familiar with diverse transmedia components to be able to fill the gap and to organize them into a larger picture. It would be the interest of the creator of transmedia franchises to strategies their worldbuilding approaches, carefully coordinate the portrayal of worldbuilding elements in multiple components to assist audience in enjoying the franchise as a whole. Additionally, I also come to an understanding that seeing worldbuilding as creative pursuit is also advantageous for research purposes as it enables me to formulate the scope of data that will be analysed.

3.4 Analysing worldbuilding

It is natural to understand that the creation of a fictional world is conducted by the author themselves. This is because, the author is the creative source that originates, materializes, and embeds the storyworld into various texts. Thus, investigating worldbuilding process for a certain brand of popular works can be done by inquiring to the authors themselves and seeking their thought in authoring the fictional universe. Ekman and Taylor (2016, p. 10) asserted that the approach of interviewing the author as the source of the storyworld can provide insight into an "authorial worldbuilding". Authorial worldbuilding recognizes the worldbuilding as the craft of the creator; specifically, author's strategies in the creation of the fictional universe and how it will be depicted across various texts.

This method is often seen employed through the production of metatextual material of transmedia works particularly those that involve the producers. For example, numerous documentaries had been produced containing exclusive interview with the transmedia creators and storytelling focusing on how certain set of films or transmedia franchise is developed; and many of them contain instances where these creators share the creative process of developing the stories as well as its fictional universe (see Becker, Burns, & Singer, 2004; Oreck, 2004).

Taking different approach, worldbuilding as a process of creating fictional world can also be seen as mental activity whereby the construction of the storyworld happen during the consumption process (Ekman & Taylor, 2016; Ryan, 2017). This is known as "readerly worldbuilding" in which audience mentally comprehend, structure, and make sense of the storyworld based on transmedia texts that they have been consuming according to their own preferential viewing order (Ekman & Taylor, 2016, p. 10). Similar to authorial worldbuilding, readerly worldbuilding can also be a reliable conceptual tools to explore worldbuilding theory where the subject of the study often involved the audience and/or fans of a predetermined cultural works rather than the works itself (see Hills, 2017; Re, 2017; Taylor, 2017).

The third category of worldbuilding is classified as "critical worldbuilding" in which I am convinced to be an effective way to explore the aesthetic aspect of worldbuilding. According Ekman and Taylor (2016), critical worldbuilding concerns with the texts; particularly, the way the fictional world is presented in the text, their context and various relation, and their meaning from a theoretical viewpoint. Rather than focusing on the author's approach in imagining the fictional universe or how fans interpret various texts and mentally generate imaginary universe, critical worldbuilding appreciate the texts itself, and its presentation to the public. I agree with Ekman and Taylor (2016) that accessing worldbuilding through critical interpretation of the text allow meaningful

and articulated discussion on how certain fictional universe is structured and perhaps its aesthetics can be further appreciated. For Ekman and Taylor (2016), questioning worldbuilding elements by discovering its functions and how does it achieve its functions is the best way to approach critical worldbuilding.

Discourse on worldbuilding typically hinges on the idea of "imaginary world" and its structure as it is portrayed in cultural works (Wolf, 2014, p. 14). Following the logic of critical worldbuilding, this makes sense because the imaginary world is the byproduct of worldbuilding and its portrayal in various works is largely accessible for empirical inquiry. In his journey to analyze transmedia storytelling feature of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Menard (2015) explore the way worldbuilding had been used to tie in multiple standalone works together by looking at several narratives settings (like characters, organization, events, locations, and internal natural laws of the storyworld) that were repeatedly portrayed across numerous works. Menard (2015) seems to follow Long (2007)'s proposition that worldbuilding can by analyzed through visiting codes (Barthesian hermeneutic codes) embedded into multiple texts within a set of transmedia narratives. According to Long (2007), these hermeneutic codes are elements in the texts representing aspect like cultural, character, chronological, geographic, environmental, and ontological that introduce, further, and conclude mysterious part of the intertwining transmedia stories.

While Long (2007) and Menard (2015) focused on transmedia stories with emphasis toward films, Sergeant (2021) makes a case that worldbuilding practices can also be seen with transmedia project that rely mostly on TV series by exploring popular media franchise called the *Game of Throne*. Sergeant (2021) asserted that worldbuilding is a method to enhance storytelling that represent the dynamic between narrative divergence and narrative convergence.

I consider narrative divergence to be a vital strategy through which the serial drama presents a world's topography to its viewers, allowing an understanding of the world's differences, regions and sites of action to emerge over a number of episodes and series. Narrative convergence, in contrast, becomes key to accenting and emphasizing a world's topology, a strategy that seems particularly rooted within the characteristics of the televisual serial drama. (Sergeant, 2021, p. 37)

With the above logic, worldbuilding promotes elements within the narrative to diverge as the plot grows; for example, more characters or more geographic locations are introduced as more series release to the public. As these elements diverge, there will be a point where these elements will be converged back or re-portrayed to enhance the depiction of the storyworld as part of the transmedia stories.

Worldbuilding analysis that focuses on the depiction of the imaginary world as it is portrayed as I have listed above are consistent with Ekman and Taylor (2016) idea on critical worldbuilding. Ekman and Taylor (2016) attempt to provide insight into the more realistic and relevant ways to approach and analyze worldbuilding practices. Specifically, how the storyworld is strategically unfolded to the audience according to how the transmedia franchise is structured. The portrayal of a singular imaginary world portrayed in various works across differing platforms shows how worldbuilding is systematically authored. Thus, analyzing this portrayal would uncover the worldbuilding aspect of the transmedia project. Long (2007), Menard (2015), and Sergeant (2021) understand this logic as their method of analysis relies on exploring the storyworld as it is depicted. By the logic of critical worldbuilding, the practice of worldbuilding goes beyond creating a canvas of which narrative can be painted over.

Long (2007) investigation on transmedia production by Jim Henson Company particularly the film *Labyrinth* (1986) and *The Dark Crystal* (1982) somewhat validify the use of critical worldbuilding analysis proposed by Ekman and Taylor (2016). In his research, Long (2007) analyses the textual material (the films themselves) and seeks to comprehend the nature of worldbuilding that takes place within the transmedia franchise. He proposed that worldbuilding can be an interplay between "negative capability" and "migratory cues" (Long, 2007, p. 53). The insertion of negative capabilities element, which is a mystery element that invoke question to audience in the individual instalment spark a migratory cue that motivate audience to consume another instalment that answer the previous question audience had in mind. Thus, expanding the storyworld with additional instalment can still be profitable since this additional instalment will optimize the use of negative capability and migratory cue to keep audience consuming more content.

Additionally, Jeff Vance Martin and Gretchen Sneegas have engaged with critical worldbuilding in their study involving the interplay between constructing an imagined world and integrating real-world issues. They posited that worldbuilding assumes the task of presenting cohesive histories, ecologies, technologies, and cultures, creating an environment that generates an immersive reality for its audience. Extending this thought, Martin and Sneegas (2020) realize that worldbuilding can be an opportunity of engaging in political discourse, intertwining real-world issues within the confines of a fictitious realm. By proposing critical worldbuilding as a framework, they recognize that through a critical engagement the texts as a subject of worldbuilding, and underlying motivation behind the portrayal of the imagined world can be uncovered.

In conclusion, it is evident that transmedia storytelling can be analysed from the perspectives of worldbuilding as its critical component. The creation of a fictional storyworld, which can sustain multiple narratives across diverse media formats, is

fundamental to the coherence and depth of transmedia narratives. Worldbuilding not only provides the structural foundation necessary for a unified storyworld but also enhances the audience's engagement through the depth and richness it brings to each narrative. By establishing a detailed storyworld, creators can employ strategies such as negative capability, additive comprehension, and migratory cues, which further enrich the audience's experience.

Understanding worldbuilding as a creative pursuit highlights its unique significance and the autonomy it grants both authors and audiences in constructing and interpreting the fictional universe. This dynamic relationship is evident in various successful franchises. Moreover, the concept of worldbuilding extends beyond the creation of narratives to encompass the aesthetic and strategic deployment of storyworld elements across multiple media. As proposed by scholars like Ekman and Taylor (2016), this approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how fictional worlds are systematically authored and presented. The interplay between narrative divergence and convergence, as seen in transmedia projects like the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* and *Game of Thrones*, highlights the strategic unfolding of storyworlds to maintain audience engagement.

To clarify the literature review aspect of this study, it is important to emphasize that it is divided into two chapters, each serving a crucial role in framing and supporting the research presented in this thesis. Chapter 2 establishes the contextual foundation for the case study by detailing the historical evolution of storytelling in Malaysia and its development as a business within the creative and cultural industries. By examining the industrial growth of the Malaysian animation sector and the shifting consumption patterns of local audiences, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the significance and relevance of the adoption of multiple media production within the malaysian unique cultural and media landscape.

Chapter 3 builds upon this contextual base by providing a comprehensive theoretical framework that underpins the study. By exploring key concepts such as "readerly worldbuilding," "critical worldbuilding," and "authorial worldbuilding," derived from established theories on transmedia storytelling and media convergence, this chapter offers a nuanced understanding of the narrative strategies employed within the realm of transmedia theory. The integration of these theoretical constructs with the research objectives ensures that the study's analytical approach is firmly rooted in existing scholarship while providing fresh insights into the dynamics of transmedia narratives.

Together, these two chapters form a cohesive literature review that clarifies the context for the case study and articulates the theoretical constructs necessary for its analysis. This dual approach not only strengthens the foundation for the subsequent chapters but also enhances the overall coherence and rigor of the thesis, ensuring that the study is both contextually relevant and theoretically robust.

In the upcoming methodology chapter, I will detail the approach taken in this qualitative case study research, centring on *Ejen Ali* franchise within the Malaysian animation realm. Opting for a qualitative method was driven by a desire to delve deep into the intricate reasons and mechanisms underpinning the emergence of transmedia phenomena like *Ejen Ali*. This choice reflects a dedication to unravelling the complex "whys" and "hows" inherent in its theoretical framework. In the next chapter, critical aspects of the research methodology will be elaborated upon. These include research objectives, questions, scope, data sources, analysis methods, and inherent limitations, each playing a pivotal role in providing a holistic understanding of the methodological framework driving the investigation into *Ejen Ali* as transmedia narrative in the Malaysian animation landscape.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY (PART 1) – QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this qualitative case study research. This study will focus on the *Ejen Ali* franchise as a case of transmedia narrative within the Malaysian animation industry. The qualitative approach is chosen because it is a feasible approach to comprehend the underlying reasons and mechanisms that facilitate the emergence of transmedia phenomena like *Ejen Ali*. This choice reflects a commitment to exploring the intricacies of the transmedia narrative, aiming to unravel the nuanced "whys" and "hows" embedded within its theoretical framework. The selection of *Ejen Ali* as the focal point of this case study is predicated on several considerations which are its widespread popularity, distinctive transmedia features, and the practical accessibility of relevant data. In the forthcoming sections of this chapter, a thorough exploration of these factors will be undertaken, elucidating their significance in shaping the research landscape.

Central to the case study is the adoption of a theoretical proposition that explains the essential nature of transmedia narrative and its worldbuilding features. This theoretical framework acts as a guideline, directing the analytical focus of the study towards understanding the specific attributes and dynamics characterizing transmedia storytelling within the context of *Ejen Ali*. Importantly, it is crucial to clarify that this study is not designed to extrapolate generalizations about transmedia practices across the Malaysian animation industry. Instead, the analytical approach leans towards a form of theoretical extension, aiming to deepen comprehension through analytical generalization. This entails drawing insights into the intricacies, motivations, and challenges behind with the utilization of transmedia storytelling and its accompanying worldbuilding in the Malaysian setting.

Subsequent sections within this chapter will expound upon critical aspects of the research methodology. These include the research objectives, research questions, scope of the study, research material and data sources, method of analysis employed, and inherent limitations of the research design. Each of these facets is instrumental in providing a comprehensive understanding of the methodological underpinnings that govern the investigation into the transmedia narrative of Ejen Ali in the Malaysian animation industry.

4.1 Qualitative case study research

Transmedia storytelling is a production ideology that take into consideration the advantage of varying media format to further expand a set of intertwined narratives for public consumption. This concept deals with the creation of text, its productions, as well as the reception among its consumers. Thus, transmedia storytelling, in theoretical standpoint, can be considered as a social phenomenon because it is a concept that plays a role in the relationship between texts and human experience engaging with said text; especially, in the convergence age where digital media and traditional media are often strategically combined and exploited in relation to one another.

Considering the worldbuilding aspect of transmedia storytelling, creators and storytellers become architects of immersive universes, where each medium contributes a unique layer to the overarching narrative tapestry. The audience, in turn, becomes an active participant, traversing through a rich and expansive story world that extends beyond the boundaries of a single medium. This dynamic interplay between creators and consumers transforms transmedia storytelling into a living, breathing entity, evolving in tandem with societal shifts and technological advancements.

Therefore, qualitative study might offer the best understanding towards transmedia phenomena. Agreeing with Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan (2022), qualitative research is a type of research that explores and seek deeper understanding towards real live problem. Approaching transmedia phenomenon qualitatively may provide comprehension over the 'how' and the 'why' this phenomenon occurs. Having to include a group of people that have experience dealing with this phenomenon also push the idea that qualitative approach can be effective. This is because, phenomenology as a qualitative study approach is an effective method to describe or explain a phenomena from those who have experience it (Tenny et al., 2022).

I also want to adopt case study research design to for this research because I am inquiring and exploring the transmedia storytelling phenomenon as it is practiced by a Malaysian animation producer, Wau Animation, within the context of local animation industry. As argued by Evans, Gruba, and Zobel (2011), a case study research is functional when a researcher wants to explore an subject as an example of a larger phenomenon. Case study research method can be treated as an empirical method because it investigate contemporary phenomenon in depth within real world context, especially when the boundary between phenomenon and context may not be apparent and evident (Yin, 2017).

Transmedia storytelling is a production logic present in global popular culture. Considering numerous research on this phenomenon (see Brindley, 2019; Brundige, 2015; Freeman, 2017; Perryman, 2008; Proctor, 2014), although there is a similar theoretical ground, individual practice of transmedia storytelling can different between one another. I would argue that context (or at least geo-political context) plays a crucial role in the way this theory is appropriated. In the case of this research, Ejen Ali franchise as a case or a subject of transmedia narratives is the phenomenon being investigated and the context is the Malaysian animation industry.

A case study, regardless of its type, fundamentally aims to illuminate decisions on why they were made, how they were executed, and what results ensued. It delves into the intricacies of decision-making processes, examining motivations, considerations, and contextual factors (Schramm, 1971). This method serves as a narrative microscope, scrutinizing decision dynamics and providing a detailed understanding of the entire journey, including the practical steps taken during implementation. Beyond documentation, it facilitates in-depth analysis, uncovering the rationale behind decisions and their impact on the broader context. In essence, a case study is a concise exploration of decision dynamics in all their multifaceted dimensions.

There are concerns over the capacity of a case study research to provide generalizable findings. Evans et al. (2011) even suggested that researchers that choose to conduct case study to reserve the expression that the case study employed is producing generalizable findings. Rather, the case study researcher should articulate that the findings of a case study helps formulate and develop principles that can be further researched in the future. Yin (2017) also understands this concern as he points that a case study, especially involving a single instance of a phenomenon, can hardly produce generalizable understanding that may represent a set of population. Sharing Yin's (2017) perspective, I agree that the academic merit of case study research lies in generating findings that are generalizable to predetermined theoretical propositions, rather than extending to entire populations or universes.

Following Yin's (2017) guidelines, my approach diverges from seeking statistical generalization by extrapolating probabilities. Instead, the focus of my study is on contributing to the expansion of theory through analytical generalization. Analytical generalization, as advocated by Yin (2017), involves deriving broader theoretical insights from specific cases, allowing for the application of findings to similar contexts and theoretical frameworks. By adopting this approach, the research aims to enrich the

theoretical landscape and enhance the understanding of specific phenomena, embracing a nuanced perspective that extends beyond statistical probabilities.

Qualitative methods, particularly phenomenology, allow for a deeper exploration of the 'how' and 'why' behind this phenomenon, with a focus on individuals who have experienced it. Tenny et al. (2022) highlight that qualitative research is effective in providing insights into real-life problems. In line with this, I aim to employ a case study research design to investigate transmedia storytelling practices within the Malaysian animation industry, specifically focusing on Wau Animation and their work, Ejen Ali. Drawing on the insights of Evans et al. (2011), a case study is deemed functional when exploring a subject as an exemplar of a larger phenomenon. This research strategy facilitates a comprehensive examination of the contemporary phenomenon within the real-world context of the local animation industry.

4.2   Choosing *Ejen Ali* as the case for this study

A case study is a study of particularity and complexity of a given case resulting from a preexisting phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Reiterating from the previous section, this study is not situated to generalize the practice of transmedia and worldbuilding in Malaysia. Rather, this case study will eventually broaden the theoretical insight about transmedia and worldbuilding by examine closely on how this technique is implemented and the motivation behind its implementation given its operation is industrially bounded by the Malaysian animation industry. Therefore, choosing the right case for a case study is pertinent to the quality and relevance of a case study research.

At its core, this study intends to scrutinize the theory of transmedia and worldbuilding as it is appropriated in the Malaysian animation industry. Generally, a suitable case for this case study should exist in the Malaysian animation industry at the same time possessing the characteristic of transmedia and worldbuilding. Agreeing with Stake (1995), the selection of a case study should maximize what I can learn in a way that

it is likely to lead me to have understands and to provide assertions that would contribute to the theory. Additionally, a case study researchers would also acknowledge the limit that they have in terms of time and resources and seeks the case with the most easiest access for data collection (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017). Considering guidelines from scholars such as Yin (2017) and Stake (1995), I decide to choose *Ejen Ali* franchise as the case for my case study. The reasonings behind this decision are the popularity of the franchise, its transmedia features, and accessibility to data.

4.2.1 Popularity of *Ejen Ali* as a franchise

Ejen Ali is a prominent animated series in Malaysia. It stands out for its uniqueness and competitiveness garnering them a substantial popularity within the animation franchise landscape. This popularity extends both locally and internationally particularly in Indonesia (Bernama, 2018). The franchise's sole cinematic venture, *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019) achieved remarkable success, securing its position as Malaysia's highest-grossing local film in 2019. This triumph surpassed competing films such as *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019) and *BoBoiBoy: The Movie 2* (2019) amassing an impressive RM 30 million in just six weeks, all while maintaining a modest production cost of RM 5.5 million (Bernama, 2018; Malaymail, 2020; Shim, 2020).

Expanding its reach, the franchise ventured into the realm of mobile gaming with the launch of a game in March 2016. This strategic move proved successful, garnering 260,000 downloads within the initial three months of its release (Singh, 2016). Notably, *Ejen Ali* blazed a trail in the e-sports domain by incorporating the *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* tournament into its franchise. This pioneering step indicate the popularity extend beyond television and cinematic screen (Team, 2021). *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019) secured further recognition by clinching the Best Box Office Film award at Malaysia's 31st Festival Film Award Ceremony (Penaklasik, 2021). The infamous character, Ejen Ali have won the Watak Animasi Popular (Popular Animation Character) award at Malaysia's Anugerah

Bintang Popular Berita Harian ke-34 (34th Berita Harian Popular Star award) event in 2021 (Rahman, 2021). This prestigious award, determined by public vote, shows Ejen Ali's dominance in popularity over its competitors in the market.

The third season of the *Ejen Ali* TV series further solidified the franchise's acclaim by securing the Best 3D Animated Programme award at the 27th Asian Television Awards held in Singapore in 2022 (Selamat, 2022). Additionally, a short film *titled Ejen Ali Misi: Juang* (2021) received recognition at the ContentAsian Awards 2021 in Singapore, winning the Best 3D Animated Kids TV Programme award. This particular short film serves as a poignant dedication to the courageous frontliners combating the Covid-19 epidemic (Entertainment, 2021).

In summary, *Ejen Ali*'s widespread popularity is substantiated by its success across various platforms, from television and cinema to gaming. The franchise's innovative approaches, such as venturing into e-sports and producing socially relevant short films, exemplify its commitment to diverse and engaging storytelling. These achievements, coupled with the numerous awards garnered by both the series and its titular character, attest to *Ejen Ali*'s enduring influence and dominance in the entertainment market.

4.2.2   Transmedia feature of *Ejen Ali* franchise

The *Ejen Ali* franchise manifests itself across diverse mediums, encompassing a comprehensive array of formats reflective of its transmedia narrative structure. The franchise comprises distinct instalments across various platforms, including a television series spanning multiple seasons, a feature film, short films, comic strips, mobile games, and even a card/board game. The meticulous enumeration of these components serves to underscore the multifaceted nature of the narrative.

The television series, comprising Season 1 (13 episodes, 2016 – 2017), Season 2 (13 episodes, 2017 – 2018), and Season 3 (13 episodes, 2022 – 2023), serves as a foundational pillar of the franchise. Accompanying this, the feature film, *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019), elevates the narrative to cinematic dimensions. The inclusion of a short film, *Ejen Ali Misi: Juang* (2021), while paying tributes to frontliners during COVID-19 pandemic, serves to showcase the diversity of stories in the franchise.

In addition to the audio-visual elements, the franchise ventures into the realm of print media with a series of comic strips. These include physical comic magazines such as *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali*, *Komik Ejen Ali: The Movie*, *Komik Ejen Ali Sidemission*, and *Komik Ejen Ali: Misi Arena*. Furthermore, the digital domain is explored through *Ejen Ali: M.A.T.A. Secret Files*, a webtoon available online. The inclusion of comic strips not only expands the narrative but also engages audiences through distinct visual and textual elements. The transmedia narrative of *Ejen Ali* extends further into the realm of gaming with the introduction of mobile games. *Ejen Ali: Emergency* and *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* invite audiences to actively participate in the narrative, blurring the lines between storytelling and interactive engagement. Additionally, the franchise delves into traditional forms of entertainment with the creation of a card/board game titled *Ejen Ali Misi: Alliance*, providing yet another avenue for audience immersion.

Jenkins (2011) explains the concept of transmedia storytelling, emphasizing the logical flow of content across various media. *Ejen Ali*, with its diverse array of components, epitomizes this transmedia logic. Even a cursory examination of the TV series and the film, at a surface level, reveals discernible connections in their storylines. This intrinsic connectivity, marked by consistency and intertextuality, serves as a robust indicator of the deliberate employment of transmedia storytelling within the Ejen Ali franchise. In the subsequent findings' sections, a more comprehensive analysis of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding features within *Ejen Ali* will be undertaken.

4.2.3 Data accessibility

The pursuit of a case study on transmedia storytelling research necessitates a comprehensive analysis of the transmedia texts under consideration. *Ejen Ali*, as the subject of this investigation, presents a unique scenario wherein a substantial portion of its cultural products is readily accessible to the public. Some elements are freely available, such as the entire first season of the TV series, which is accessible on YouTube, and the mobile games, downloadable from app stores. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that certain products within the franchise, including comic books, films, and subsequent seasons of the TV series, require monetary transactions for access. Despite this, the overarching accessibility of most of the transmedia components positions *Ejen Ali* as a practical subject for detailed analysis.

Another important consideration in this case study is the engagement with the production team through in-depth interviews. Preliminary efforts to establish cooperation for participation in this research have yielded promising results. The production team at Wau Animation, the creative force behind *Ejen Ali*, has exhibited a favorable inclination toward agreeing to in-depth interviews. Moreover, the receptiveness of several directors associated with the project augments the feasibility of *Ejen Ali* serving as an ideal case study candidate for this research initiative. This positive response not only emphasizes the potential richness of data available but also speaks to the cooperation and openness of the production team, offering a valuable dimension to the investigation.

The high accessibility of *Ejen Ali*'s content is advantageous for this research endeavor. With a significant portion of the transmedia texts available for public consumption, the breadth and depth of the analysis can be more extensive, providing a comprehensive understanding of the franchise's transmedia storytelling dynamics. The free accessibility of certain components, such as the first season of the TV series on

YouTube also enhances the potential for garnering diverse perspectives and interpretations. Furthermore, the willingness of the production team to partake in in-depth interviews amplifies the potential for obtaining nuanced insights into the transmedia storytelling practices employed in the creation of *Ejen Ali*. The prospect of direct engagement with creators and directors offers a rare opportunity to delve into the motivations, strategies, and collaborative processes that contribute to the transmedia narrative construction.

4.2.4   Considering alternatives

There are numerous animations works either in the TV sector or the cinematic scene of the Malaysian animation industry. However, for the purposes of this case study, only three prominent animations have committed to adopt multiple media formats to expand their franchise mimicking transmedia practice which are *Upin dan Ipin*, *BoBoiBoy*, and *Ejen Ali*. The exclusion of *Upin dan Ipin* from consideration as a primary case study stems from its episodic narrative structure in both the TV series and film. This format results in standalone storylines, lacking substantial narrative connections between the two mediums. The characters within *Upin dan Ipin* also exhibit minimal growth, maintaining consistent personalities since their debut. Moreover, the worldbuilding aspect of the franchise does not evolve in tandem with its growth. It appears that *Upin dan Ipin* focuses on multi-platform adoption not to extend its storyworld but to capitalize on the popularity of its intellectual property in the consumer market.

In contrast, both *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali* exhibit serialized storylines between their respective TV series and films, demonstrating a more cohesive connection between instalments. The inclusion of comic book instalments in both franchises further enhances the narrative breadth available to fans, indicating a dedicated commitment to expanding the storyworld. Notably, as these franchises expand, the characters undergo substantial growth in terms of personality, physicality, and emotional development. However,

despite *BoBoiBoy* sharing these transmedia traits with *Ejen Ali*, challenges might arise in the attempt to study *BoBoiBoy* due to the production team's secretive policy. Previous experience of contacting and requesting cooperation from Monsta Studio, creator of *BoBoiBoy,* was unfruitful hindering access to crucial data for the project.

The principle of case study research, as advocated by Stake (1995) and Yin (2017), emphasizes the significance of selecting cases with sufficient accessibility to data, ensuring the research project's realism and empirical contribution to theoretical scholarship. Considering the challenging experience of seeking cooperation from Monsta Studio, the creator of *BoBoiBoy*, in the past, coupled with the numerous awards won by the *Ejen Ali* franchise in competition with *BoBoiBoy*, I have decided to pursue *Ejen Ali* as the primary case study for this research initiative.

The selection of *Ejen Ali* over *BoBoiBoy* for this case study is rooted in practical considerations. The extensive accessibility to data afforded by the *Ejen Ali* franchise, coupled with the strong cooperation from the production team, provides foundation for a comprehensive and empirical investigation into transmedia storytelling practices. This strategic decision aligns with the research objective of delving into the intricate dynamics of transmedia narrative construction within the Malaysian animation industry. Consequently, *Ejen Ali* emerges as an optimal case study, offering valuable insights into the evolving landscape of transmedia storytelling and its impact on narrative coherence and audience engagement within the animation genre.

4.3 Theoretical proposition, research objectives and research questions

Theoretical propositions are integral to case studies as they guide the research design, offering a conceptual framework to organize and structure the study. They assist in formulating hypotheses and research questions, ensuring relevance and rigor by grounding the investigation in existing knowledge (Yin, 2017). The propositions help in interpreting findings and contributing to theory building, allowing researchers to draw

connections and enhance the study's validity and reliability. Additionally, they facilitate generalization, enabling insights from the case study to have broader applicability. Overall, theoretical propositions play a crucial role in providing direction, coherence, and academic significance to case study research.

For the purpose of examining transmedia cases within the Malaysian animation industry and drawing insights from the lessons gleaned in Chapter 3, it is practical to formulate a theoretical proposition anchored in the theories of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding. Jenkins (2007, para 2) describe transmedia storytelling it as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience". In its optimal manifestation, transmedia storytelling involves a strategic deployment of each medium's strengths and allowing a narrative to unfold across various platforms such as film, television, novels, comics, games, and even amusement park attractions (Jenkins, 2006). Importantly, individual parts in the franchise should be self-contained and standalone, enabling audience enjoyment without the necessity of consuming all components.

Complementing the concept of transmedia storytelling is the pivotal role of worldbuilding, a process of developing a storyworld that accommodates multiple plots and storylines, synthesizing them into a cohesive overarching transmedia narrative. Within the framework of transmedia, it is imperative to recognize that worldbuilding stands as a linchpin in the extension of transmedia narratives. Without the creation and emphasis of a well-constructed world, the establishment of a transmedia universe becomes nearly insurmountable. Worldbuilding not only ensures consistency and coherence across multiple instalments within a story franchise but also serves as a conduit for audience immersion into the storyworld. Richter (2016) aligns with Jenkins' perspective on transmedia storytelling, asserting that worldbuilding permits audiences to

immerse themselves in the storyworld by deciphering fragments of information dispersed across diverse media products. Additionally, Menard (2015) corroborates Long's (2007) viewpoint, emphasizing that worldbuilding functions to interconnect various instalments, fostering a cohesive storyworld where elements can be explored through references seamlessly traversing from one instalment to another.

Transmedia storytelling operates on the premise of synergy among various media platforms to craft a holistic and engaging narrative experience. The intricate interplay between mediums allows for the expansion and exploration of the storyworld, thereby enhancing audience engagement. This theory underlines the importance of not only crafting compelling narratives but also ensuring that each medium contributes uniquely to the overarching transmedia narrative, providing audiences with a comprehensive and immersive entertainment experience.

In tandem, the significance of worldbuilding emerges as a critical component in sustaining the coherence and consistency of transmedia narratives. Worldbuilding acts as the foundation upon which the narrative elements rest, allowing for the seamless integration of diverse storylines across different media. This aspect of transmedia theory emphasizes the role of a well-constructed and intricately detailed storyworld in facilitating audience understanding, enjoyment, and exploration of the fictional universe. Taking consideration of these discussions, the theoretical proposition is formulated as follows.

A transmedia narrative should encompass a set of **standalone texts and cultural artifacts that exist in diverse media platforms**. Equipped with worldbuilding, **each subset of a transmedia narrative should contain a references (in the form of worldbuilding element)** on each other creating interconnectedness between varying storylines, plots, depictions, and portrayal. While each part can be consumed individually without pre-consuming the other, the references established through worldbuilding will **ensure cohesive and immersive entertainment experience.**

This theoretical proposition will serve as a guiding framework for the analysis of the *Ejen Ali* franchise within the Malaysian animation industry, providing a lens through which to examine the effectiveness and dynamics of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding in the context of this specific case study.

Aligned with the established theoretical proposition framing *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative, I proceed to formulate research objectives and its accompanying research questions to further clarify the direction of this case study. This is consistent with Yin (2017) proposal that establishment of research question will improve the clarity of the case study. The research objectives research questions are listed in numbered format in section 1.5 of this thesis. Nonetheless, further explanation on the RO and RQ are included in the proceeding discussion.

The first research objective aims to scrutinize the adoption of multiple media formats for the expansion of the *Ejen Ali* franchise within the Malaysian animation industry. Accompanying this, the research question seeks to gauge the extent to which the *Ejen Ali* franchise incorporates a variety of media formats to convey its content. This research objective and question pair intends to illuminate the transmedia characteristics of the *Ejen Ali* franchise, focusing on the diverse platforms utilized. This entails an

exploration of the multitude of texts and cultural artifacts encompassed within *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative, necessitating a comprehensive description of each text or cultural artifact's portrayal, be it in the form of storylines or the depiction of storyworld.

The second research objective shifts the focus to the examination of the portrayal of worldbuilding elements embedded within the *Ejen Ali* franchise. The corresponding research question delves into the ways in which worldbuilding elements are showcased in the construction of content for the *Ejen Ali* franchise. This research objective and question pairing necessitates a content analysis of instalments containing storylines, seeking references between different texts to unveil the structure of storyworld. Furthermore, it mandates an analysis of how the establishment of these references, manifested as worldbuilding elements, contributes to a cohesive and immersive reading experience for the audience.

The third and final research objective delves into the analysis of the production strategy employed in developing the *Ejen Ali* franchise as a transmedia narrative. Correspondingly, the research question seeks insights into how Wau Animation approaches the production of the *Ejen Ali* franchise as transmedia stories. This research objective and question pair necessitates engagement with the production team, probing into the creation and development processes of *Ejen Ali* across diverse formats. This inquiry is essential to unravel the strategic decisions and considerations that underlie the production of a transmedia narrative, shedding light on the approaches adopted by Wau Animation in bringing *Ejen Ali* to fruition across varying platforms.

In summary, these research objectives and accompanying questions strategically guide the investigation into *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative, addressing the adoption of multiple media formats, the portrayal of worldbuilding elements, and the intricacies of the production strategy. This structured approach aligns with the theoretical proposition,

providing a comprehensive framework to delve into the complexities of transmedia storytelling within the context of the Malaysian animation industry.

4.4   Research scope, research material and data collection

Within transmedia storytelling, worldbuilding essentially is a process of creating a fictional universe, sometimes referred to as a storyworld. According to Ekman and Taylor (2016), there are three perspectives on analysing worldbuilding. First is "readerly worldbuilding" that recognizes the creation process is considered as a mental process conducted by readers or audiences as they consume a set of stories within the confines of transmedia narrative. Exploring through readerly worldbuilding necessitates researcher to inquire to the audience themselves and explore how they make sense of the storyworld as they consume numerous texts. Second is the notion of "authorial worldbuilding" that recognize the authority of storytellers, the one who craft the storyworld as it is unfolds within numerous texts. The approach of authorial worldbuilding requires the researcher to inquire the storyteller as the source of the storyworld and determine how they create the storyworld and their approach in portraying them through a set of texts.

The third and the last perspective is "critical worldbuilding" that recognize the complexity of storyworld can be truly understood by looking at the texts itself and determine how the storyworld is unfold. The perspectives of critical worldbuilding put more emphasis on the texts itself, its diversity and its portrayal of the storyworld. Ekman and Taylor (2016) assertion that dynamic interplay among worldbuilding infrastructures and/or elements can provide an insight into worldbuilding strategies embedded in multiple works. Worldbuilding infrastructures can be defined as elements within the narrative that make or describe the storyworld in general or parts of the storyworld. As argued in the literature section, elements like characters, locations, supernatural laws, technologies, themes and many other can be considered as worldbuilding elements.

This research centers on the examination of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia storytelling work and its productions within the context of the Malaysian animation industry. The focus on the production side emphasizes a departure from the audience-oriented approach. Therefore, I incline to adopt critical worldbuilding approach to explore the worldbuilding aspect of *Ejen Ali.* Agreeing with Stake (1995), the strength of a case study relied on interpretation of the phenomenon. With the theoretical proposition in place, I am able to examine texts surrounding *Ejen Ali* and analyse the employment of worldbuilding that make *Ejen Ali* an immersive and cohesive transmedia franchise. Additionally, in tandem with the critical worldbuilding perspective, this study also integrates authorial worldbuilding insights to reinforce its analytical framework. Engaging with the production team through inquiries seeks to unravel the motivations behind embracing and investing in a multi-platform production strategy. This approach intends to shed light on the motivation, strength and challenges involved in crafting a transmedia narrative like *Ejen Ali*.

The data collection for this study involves three primary sources: physical artifacts, documentation, and in-depth interviews. Texts produced by Wau Animation for *Ejen Ali* serve as physical artifacts, recognized as crucial data for case study research (Yin, 2017). These texts represent tangible cultural artifacts that contribute significantly to the overall understanding of the case study. Documentation, in the form of third-party interviews with the production team, adds another layer of evidence. Documentation, characterized by its stability, unobtrusiveness, and specificity, proves valuable in substantiating findings within the case study context.

The nature of publicly available data, encompassing films, TV series, comic books, mobile games, trading card games, and interviews with the production team, aligns with ethical considerations for case study research. However, in-depth interviews necessitate a more meticulous and ethical approach, considering the potential sensitivity

of information involved. Adhering to the guidelines of Universiti Malaya's Research and Ethics Committee, a review application was submitted on August 27th, 2022, and received approval on September 20th, 2022.

The criteria for potential participants in the in-depth interviews are delineated as follows. Personnel directly engaged in the production of commercial artwork for the *Ejen Ali* animation franchise across various platforms, such as TV series, feature films, mobile games, comic books, and trading card games, are considered eligible. Priority is accorded based on roles, including C-Level executives, executives, writers/scriptwriters, and animators/visual artists. Exclusion criteria encompass personnel with indirect involvement in the production process, such as human resource (HR) executives, administrative assistants, and customer service representatives, as well as temporary personnel like freelancers and interns.

The recruitment process comprises four stages. Initial identification involves recognizing potential participants based on their contribution to the production of commercial artwork for *Ejen Ali*. Screening follows, wherein potential participants are assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Contacting participants is done through personal and corporate invitations via mail, email, and social networking platforms. Finally, recruiting participants involves organizing in-depth interview sessions at mutually agreed upon locations and times. This meticulous process ensures a comprehensive and ethical approach to data collection, aligning with the established guidelines and ethical considerations of the research.

A semi-structured in-depth interview is chosen for the interview session giving opportunity for me, as case study researchers, to prepare lines of questions from the interview session at the same time provide space for open-ended discussions with interview respondents. As argue by Osborne and Grant-Smith (2021), semi structured approach can help to understand respondents' experiences on their own terms,

comprehending their view on certain phenomena and how that view might shape knowledge and meaning. With semi structured interviews a set of open-ended questions is prepared in consideration of the theoretical proposition, research objectives and research questions established in the previous section. The topics of the open-ended questions should be as follows:

1. Success factors of *Ejen Ali* franchise in consumer's market

2. *Ejen Ali* uniqueness in terms storytelling

3. Multi-platform productions surrounding *Ejen Ali* franchise

4. Production process of *Ejen Ali* works

4.5 Method of analysis

In the pursuit of ensuring the quality of the case study research, this study adopts the construct validity method. The significance of construct validity, as pointed out by Yin (2017), lies in its imperative role in compelling researchers to meticulously identify the accurate operational measures corresponding to the concepts under investigation. To fortify the construct validity of the case study, Yin (2017) proposes employing multiple sources of evidence and establishing a chain of evidence to showcase precise operational measures.

In alignment with Yin's (2017) assertion, scholars such as Stake (1995), Denzin and Lincoln (2008), and Peter (1981) concur that case study research demands the support of multiple sources of evidence in a triangulating configuration of data. Elaborating on this, the utilization of multiple sources of evidence necessitates the implementation of data triangulation where the collection of evidence from diverse sources converge to affirm a common finding.

Recognizing the analytical phase as pivotal in case study research, Yin (2017) and Baxter and Jack (2008) emphasize the utility of relying on theoretical propositions as a strategic commencement. The crux of this approach implies that the analysis of data sources should pivot on predetermined theoretical propositions. To operationalize this strategy, Yin (2017) introduces the "logic model" analytic technique, wherein the researcher empirically matches observed events with theoretically predicted events. This not only provides a structured approach to analysis but also aligns the investigation with a theoretical framework, enhancing the overall coherence and depth of the case study.

Facilitating the extraction and corroboration of evidence in this research is qualitative content analysis. Mayring (2000) defines qualitative content analysis as an empirical and methodologically controlled approach to text analysis within the context of communication, adhering to content analytical rules and step-by-step models without hasty quantification. Additionally, Mayring (2004) proposes a category system that allows researchers to apply a systematic, theory-guided approach to text analysis. In this method, categories assume a central role (Kohlbacher, 2006). Under Mayring's framework, these categories serve as the focal point of analysis, diligently founded and revised throughout the analytic process. Consequently, through qualitative content analysis, the research endeavors to extract and categorize evidence from the data, aligning with the logic model proposed by Yin (2017). These categorized findings are subsequently discussed in a thematic order within the findings and discussion section of this thesis.

The methodological approach adopted in this study rests on the foundation of construct validity, emphasizing the meticulous identification of operational measures. The integration of multiple sources of evidence and the establishment of a chain of evidence serve to fortify the construct validity of the case study. Furthermore, the reliance on theoretical propositions guides the analytical phase. Moreover, the logic model is

expected to provide a structured framework for empirical matching of observed and theoretically predicted events. Supporting the logic model, qualitative content analysis offers a methodologically controlled approach to evidence extraction and categorization, supporting the overall coherence and depth of the case study analysis.

4.6   Research limitations and fair use dealings

This research examines *Ejen Ali* as a case transmedia narrative within the Malaysian animation industry. The application of the case study research method serves as the conduit for achieving this specific research objective. It is crucial to emphasize that while this study sheds light on Wau Animation's implementation of transmedia storytelling through *Ejen Ali*, its findings should not be construed as representative of the broader landscape of transmedia storytelling practices among producers within the Malaysian animation industry.

To mitigate potential concerns regarding the generalizability of the findings, I advocate a commitment to Yin's (2017) construct validity framework in the analysis of the case study. Adhering to this framework entails the identification of multiple sources of evidence within the text and the establishment of chains of evidence that align with the theoretical propositions guiding the study. Consequently, the analytical generalization employed in this study extends the current understanding of the theory by scrutinizing its application within the specific context of *Ejen Ali*. This methodological approach explains the rationale behind the experimental design early in the study, ensuring that despite the acknowledged limitations related to theoretical propositions, the concluding results remain relevant.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that the primary focus of this study is on the production of a transmedia narrative. While certain findings may give reference to audience reception, this research will not dive into an extensive exploration of audience studies. Such an omission is driven by considerations of resource constraints, which could

potentially compromise the feasibility and realism of conducting this case study research. Through a meticulous examination of *Ejen Ali*'s storyworld via critical worldbuilding and active engagement with the production team through authorial worldbuilding, this study anticipates generating ample data to uncover meaningful and insightful discoveries regarding the appropriation of transmedia storytelling in the Malaysian animation settings.

In acknowledgment of potential copyright implications, it is pertinent to clarify that this dissertation may contain copyrighted material for which explicit authorization from the copyright owner may not have been obtained. The inclusion of such material is motivated by the intent to advance understanding of the theoretical application of transmedia storytelling and the creative processes underlying it. It is posited that this constitutes a fair use/fair dealing of copyrighted material, as stipulated in Section 9 of Malaysia's Copyright Act 1987. As per the provisions of Title 4 of Malaysia's Copyright Act 1987, Section 9, the dissemination of the material within this thesis is executed without profit and caters to individuals with an interest in accessing the information for research and educational purposes. The use of copyrighted material will be cited to its copyright owner accordingly.

The next chapter will describe the implementation of the data collection process. It also offers a general summary of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld, providing context and background essential for understanding the subsequent analyses. In addition, it will detail the materials collected for the case study research and provide summaries of these materials. Furthermore, the next chapter will include information on the interviews and respondents. This comprehensive overview sets the stage for the in-depth discussions in the following chapters, ensuring that readers have a clear understanding of the scope of data collected and its description.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY (PART 2) – MATERIAL GATHERED

This chapter serves as a review of the data collection process preceding the two subsequent discussion chapters. It provides a general summary of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld, details the materials gathered for the case study research as well as its summaries, and describes the methods used to recruit respondents. Additionally, it includes an overview of the participants who took part in the in-depth interviews. The exploration of *Ejen Ali* as transmedia narrative is grounded in a meticulous examination of diverse data sources, including physical artifacts, and a series of in-depth interviews conducted with the production team. These two principal data collection methods shape the nature of the data under scrutiny.

Physical artifacts, encompassing cultural products like TV series, films, mobile games, comic books, and trading card games associated with the *Ejen Ali* franchise, are accessed through publicly available sources obtainable through various means, including free content, paid subscriptions, or individual purchases. While physical artifacts draw from accessible sources, in-depth interviews present a distinct method, requiring a collaborative approach and cooperation from the relevant parties. The procedural details of securing this cooperation have been meticulously outlined in the methodology chapter. This chapter serves as a comprehensive repository, showcasing all the pertinent data amassed for this study. It provides a vital reference for subsequent discussion chapters, offering readers insight into the diverse sources that inform the analysis. Additionally, the chapter elucidates limitations and constraints encountered during the data collection process ensuring transparency and providing justifications for mitigating these constraints.

Beyond presenting the raw data, this findings chapter lays the groundwork for the ensuing discussion chapters. It outlines key contextual aspects that contribute to the analysis of the reviewed data. This strategic approach aims to enhance reader comprehension, facilitating a smoother transition to the in-depth discussions that follow.

5.1   General settings of *Ejen Ali*

Ejen Ali, as a transmedia franchise, spans various media formats, each contributing to the rich narrative tapestry of the series. The primary components of this animated franchise are its television series and film instalments, which serve as the primary vessels for storytelling. However, the franchise extends its reach into other dimensions, such as comic books and mobile games, each offering a unique contribution that will be explored in the subsequent sections. The intention of this section is to provide the base information of the *Ejen Ali* storyline so that reader might have some initial review on *Ejen Ali* narrative before getting deeper into each instalment in later section.

5.1.1   Theme

Ejen Ali finds its place within the action and comedy genres, revolving around the themes of espionage, secrecy, and security. The narrative unfolds in a world where main characters and organizations, whether protagonists or antagonists, operate in the shadows, beyond the gaze of the general public. The central conflict driving the storyline is the relentless pursuit of protecting Cyberaya from villainous and terrorist attacks, both from internal and external threats.

5.1.2   Locations

The majority of *Ejen Ali*'s narratives are set in the fictional city of Cyberaya, located in Malaysia (a real country). Many other locations (such as rural area of Pinggiran, energy powerplant, and Sekolah Rendah Teknology Cyberaya 1 (Cyberaya Primary School of Technology) within Cyberaya are mentioned throughout the franchise.

5.1.3 Main Character

In the expansive *Ejen Ali* storyworld, all spy agents are referred to as "Ejen," paying homage to the Malay language. The protagonist, Ali, a primary school student turned spy agent, discovers a highly advanced military intelligence device, elevating him to the status of Ejen Ali. This device, known as Infinite Retinal Intelligence System (I.R.I.S.), enhances Ali's special awareness, agility, and combat skills, making him an ideal candidate for the role of a spy agent.

5.1.4 Supporting Characters

The supporting cast *in Ejen Ali* is categorically divided into two groups – agents and enemies. Among the agents, Ejen Alicia and Ejen Bakar stand out as close allies and typical teammates of the main character. The animated series introduces additional agents whose roles will be explored in the course of this thesis. Antagonistic characters such as Uno, Doz, and Trez add complexity to the storyline, embodying the challenges that Ejen Ali faces in his quest to protect Cyberaya.

5.1.5 Organization

The narrative structure of *Ejen Ali* is shaped by two conflicting organizations. On the side of good stands is the Meta Advance Tactical Agency (M.A.T.A.), a spy agency with the mission to safeguard Cyberaya from both foreign and domestic threats. M.A.T.A. serves as the bastion of defence against those who seek to disrupt the peace of the technologically advanced city. M.A.T.A. is made up of four (4) units (called pillar) with each unit having its own strength. The first pillar is called Neuro consisting of spy agents that are great at analyzing situations and strategizing move for their team to complete given task. Next is Techno, a pillar formed by spy agents that are well versed in technology and weaponry. The Inviso pillar, on the other hand, is a unit for spy agents that are specialized with

stealth and disguise. The last pillar is Combat, a unit for spy agents that focus on their physical strength and proficiency in combat better than those in other pillar.

Contrasting with the virtuous M.A.T.A. is the nefarious Numeros, a treacherous group established as the primary antagonist in the *Ejen Ali* storyline. Numeros harbors a malevolent ambition – the conquest of the technologically advanced Cyberaya for sinister purposes. The clash between M.A.T.A. and Numeros forms the crux of the overarching conflict, driving the narrative forward across diverse media platforms.

5.2   Reviews of accessed physical artifacts.

Physical or cultural artifacts can be in various format revolving the work of art that can be collected and observed as part of the case study (Yin, 2017). Transmedia, inherently dealing with texts presented in various formats, highlights the importance of these artifacts as rich and multifaceted data sources. This section will showcase an extensive review on the diverse forms of the accessed artifacts, their content, and their intrinsic significance in alignment with the theoretical propositions meticulously established in the preceding methodology chapter. Importantly, data from physical artifacts can provide opportunities for this case study to answer primarily the first and second research questions. By analysing the storylines and/or portrayal of *Ejen Ali* storyworld in various media format, this case study can show the extent to which Wau Animation expands *Ejen Ali* franchise especially in terms of the number of instalments across varying platform. This would satisfy the first objective of the case study. Additionally, by relying on the theoretical proposition, content analysis over each instalment can help identify worldbuilding elements and investigate their purpose of building an interconnected and cohesive narrative across varying media format. This will eventually satisfy the second objective of the case study.

5.2.1   TV series, feature film, and short film

The TV series instalments consists of three-seasoned TV series with each season containing 13 episodes. The feature film and the short film both remain in a single instalment. Details about these instalments are reviewed below.

5.2.1.1   TV Series (Season 1, 2016 – 2017)

The first season made its public debut in April 2016 and continued its successful television broadcast until March 2017, encompassing a total of thirteen episodes. Each episode, titled with prefix "Misi" or its English counterpart "Mission," followed by a subject centered to given episode. Currently, this season is accessible at YouTube (EjenAli Channel) and Disney+ Hotstar (Paid subscription). The following is a list of episodes for Season 1. Table 5.1 showcases the list of episodes for season 1.

Table 5.1: Episode title for each episode in the first season of *Ejen Ali* TV series

Episode number	Title
1	*Mission: I.R.I.S* (2016)
2	*Mission: Alpha* (2016)
3	*Mission: Even* (2016)
4	*Mission: Comot* (2016)
5	*Mission: Blueprint* (2016)
6	*Mission: Rise Up* (2016)
7	*Mission: Gegas Protocol* (2016)
8	*Mission: Performance* (2016)
9	*Mission: Potential* (2016)
10	*Mission: Sensational* (2016)
11	*Mission: Evidence* (2017)
12	*Mission: Uno* (2017)
13	*Mission: Override* (2017)

Overall storylines in season one centers around character introductions and the pursuit of a sought-after intelligence device known as I.R.I.S. The major events in the first episode reveal a twist of fate, as Ali accidentally acquires the Infinite Retinal Intelligence System (I.R.I.S.) due to a mistake by Numeros' henchman. This powerful device can only be activated for a single user at a time, and Ali finds himself caught in a conflict between M.A.T.A. and Numeros after unintentionally activating and registering I.R.I.S. to himself. With I.R.I.S. now registered to Ali, M.A.T.A. takes the decision to appoint him as a junior agent. Under the guidance of the experienced Ejen Alicia (also junior agent and Ali's classmate) and the senior agent Ejen Bakar (who happens to be Ali's uncle), Ali begins his journey as a junior agent, navigating the complexities of his newfound role.

Each episode of the season follows a pattern, featuring a minor standalone story resolution within the episode and a major overarching plot that carries over to subsequent episodes, concluding at the season's end. For instance, in *Mission: Alpha*, Ali and his team work to save renowned scientist Dr. Tong from the clutches of his wicked apprentice, Dr. Aaron. While the immediate threat is neutralized within the episode, the larger mystery surrounding I.R.I.S. persists, with M.A.T.A. lacking sufficient data about the potentially dangerous device.

Moreover, this season introduces pivotal characters poised to play significant roles as the franchise evolves. Notable figures include Dr. Ghazali, Cyberaya's top scientist and Ali's father; Ejen Rizwan, a M.A.T.A. agent in Inviso pillars; General Rama, a Neuro pillar agent and one of the top leader in M.A.T.A., also serving as the adoptive father to Ejen Alicia, and Ejen Jenny, a crucial techno-based agent at M.A.T.A. headquarters. Interestingly, it is revealed at the end of the season that Ejen Jenny appear to be a double agent named Cinco working for Numeros. The season's climax unveils several key developments, including the revelation of Uno, the leader of Numeros,

breaking into M.A.T.A. headquarters to forcibly seize I.R.I.S. from Ejen Ali. Ali activates "Override mode," allowing I.R.I.S. to control nearby technology for protection at the expense of Ali's consciousness. Despite Uno's defeat, Numeros fails to secure I.R.I.S., and both Uno and Cinco manage to escape, leaving the season's unresolved threads poised for future exploration.

5.2.1.2 TV Series (Season 2, 2017 – 2018)

Following the first season, the second season was broadcasted to the public through local broadcasting channel, TV3 beginning in September 2017. All thirteen episodes successfully aired on television until March 2018. Currently, this season is accessible at YouTube (EjenAli Channel) and Disney+ Hotstar (Paid subscription). The following is a list of episodes for Season 2. Table 5.2 showcases the list of episodes for season 2.

Table 5.2: Episode title for each episode in the second season of *Ejen Ali* TV series

Episode number	Title
1	*Mission: Academy* (2017)
2	*Mission: Orientation* (2017)
3	*Mission: Play* (2017)
4	*Mission: Analog* (2017)
5	*Mission: Challenge* (2017)
6	*Mission: Milk* (2017)
7	*Mission: Return* (2017)
8	*Mission: Purpose* (2017)
9	*Mission: Duty* (2018)
10	*Mission: Atlas* (2018)
11	*Mission: Hope* (2018)
12	*Mission: Diez* (2018)
13	*Mission: Legacy* (2018)

In Season 2, a new dimension of M.A.T.A.'s operations is unveiled with the revelation of the M.A.T.A. Academy, an educational facility situated on an island not far from Cyberaya. This academy proves to be a vital component of M.A.T.A.'s infrastructure, functioning as a training ground for junior agents seeking to enhance their skills and effectiveness in the world of espionage. Building on the narrative continuity from Season 1, M.A.T.A. remains committed to safeguarding Ejen Ali and preventing the I.R.I.S. from falling into Numeros's hands. The precarious nature of the Override Mode, which has the potential to harm both the user and surrounding teammates, necessitates close monitoring of Ejen Ali's progress in his training.

M.A.T.A. Academy emerges as a hub for junior agents, providing them with the necessary training to elevate their spy capabilities. Upon enrollment, Ejen Ali and Ejen Alicia are enrolled in courses and engage in team-based mock battles against fellow trainees. Despite their commitment to the academy, both agents continue to collaborate with senior agent Ejen Bakar for fieldwork, ensuring that their core responsibilities are not compromised.

Season 2 introduces a dynamic storytelling approach, oscillating between scenes of Ejen Ali undertaking fieldwork missions, such as confronting Analogman in Cyberaya in *Mission: Analog*, and scenes within M.A.T.A. Academy, exemplified by mock battles in *Mission: Duty*. The season brings forth a compelling plot twist involving Ejen Rizwan, a key character from Season 1, seemingly betraying M.A.T.A. and aligning with Numeros. This betrayal sparks frustration in Ejen Ali, triggering the Override Mode once again, leading to the escape of Numeros's henchmen and injuries to Ejen Ali's teammates. Struggling to control the Override Mode, Ejen Ali faces a loss of respect from his peers at M.A.T.A. Academy. However, through resilience and determination, Ejen Ali gradually regains their trust, showcasing a character development arc throughout the season.

Meanwhile, Cinco is revealed to have successfully acquired the I.R.I.S. underlying code and integrates it into Uno's helmet. Numeros exploits this advantage to infiltrate M.A.T.A. Academy, seeking access to M.A.T.A.'s mainframe. The climax of Season 2 unfolds with an intense and dramatic battle, featuring over-the-top fights between Ejen Zain, leader of M.A.T.A.'s Neuro unit, and Uno. The outcome results in the destruction of M.A.T.A. Academy, claiming the lives of both Ejen Zain and Uno, concluding the season with a gripping and impactful finale.

5.2.1.3 Feature film – *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019)

This film is currently accessible on Disney+ Hotstar. The film has a runtime of approximately about one and a half hours. This film is an intense narrative that unfolds across two timelines, 15 years apart. In the past, Aliya and Niki embark on a perilous mission to steal an artificial heart for the elderly Mak Yah. The effort (considered as criminal moves by the authority) takes an unexpected turn when intercepted by pillar leaders, leading to Aliya's brave decision to stay behind and ensure Niki's escape. Instead of tossing Aliya to jail, the M.A.T.A. recruited Aliya as their agent.

The film depicts a surprising twist with the introduction of I.R.I.S Neo worn by newly introduced agents, Ejen Bobby and Ejen Fit. Their heroism and proficient use of I.R.I.S Neo with an Override Mode akin to the original I.R.I.S worn by Ejen Ali bring unexpected revelations. The storyline deepens as Ejen Ali learns that I.R.I.S Neo is M.A.T.A.'s effort to replicate and improve the original I.R.I.S. It is a secret project with a prototype accessible to all M.A.T.A agents. This revelation raises doubts about his original I.R.I.S and prompts Ejen Ali to embark on a journey into his mother's memories, unveiling a lullaby music box concealing a mysterious pen drive.

A clandestine meeting exposes shocking truths about M.A.T.A.'s establishment, leading to Ali's decision to separate from the organization. The story's climax involves a showdown with Niki gaining control of I.R.I.S Neo, leading to Ejen Ali's going into the spiritual dimension of I.R.I.S where he discovers the truth about his mother's sacrifice. Returning to reality, Ejen Ali defeats Niki. The movie concluded with Ejen Ali willingly agreeing to return the original I.R.I.S. back to M.A.T.A.

5.2.1.4 TV Series (Season 3, 2017 – 2018)

Season 3 storylines follow the feature film with Ejen Ali not having access to I.R.I.S. anymore. Different from season 1 and season 2, season 3 is released initially on Disney+ Hotstar platform in 2022 and then broadcasted in local channel, TV3, in the next year. The following is a list of episodes for Season 2. Table 5.3 showcases the list of episodes for season 3.

Table 5.3: Episode title for each episode in the third season of *Ejen Ali* TV series

Episode number	Title
1	*Mission: Arena* (2022)
2	*Mission: Possible* (2022)
3	*Mission: Upgrade* (2022)
4	*Mission: Payback* (2022)
5	*Mission: Blackout* (2022)
6	*Mission: Hunt* (2022)
7	*Mission: Trap* (2022)
8	*Mission: Change* (2022)
9	*Mission: Hybrid* (2022)
10	*Mission: Camp* (2023)
11	*Mission: Vital* (2023)
12	*Mission: Sting* (2023)
13	*Mission: Champion* (2023)

This season showcases the debut of M.A.T.A.'s latest educational facility, the M.A.T.A. Arena. Designed as a battleground for junior agents, this cutting-edge facility serves as a platform for showcasing their skills and engaging in combat to determine the most proficient junior M.A.T.A. agents. The primary battle format in M.A.T.A. Arena tournament revolves around strategically positioned capture points, where teams of three must simultaneously defend their assigned points while attempting to seize control of others. The dynamic nature of the competition emphasizes both offensive and defensive tactics, creating a thrilling clash of strategies.

In addition to team-based challenges, the tournament includes individual tests at various sites. Performance in each test translates into points, and those with the highest cumulative scores at the conclusion of the tournament earn higher rankings. Previously key figures such as Ejen Fit, Ejen Rizwan, Ejen Rama, and Ejen Aliya stood out as past winners of the Arena tournament when they were junior agents. Their legacy adds prestige to the competition, inspiring current participants to strive to be champions.This season also introduces a new wave of junior agents from overseas indicating that M.A.T.A.'s agent is not restricted to Cyberjaya.

Ejen Ali, having relinquished I.R.I.S. to M.A.T.A., undergoes a transformation in his suits and weaponry. His fighting style also seems to have improved, perhaps, inspired by his mother's legacy. A significant event in this season is M.A.T.A.'s decision to award I.R.I.S. to the tournament champion. The central conflict of this season revolves around Numeros' attack, with Cinco assuming leadership after the death of Uno in the previous season. This unexpected shift in leadership introduces a new dynamic to the conflict, leaving agents grappling with the consequences of Uno's absence and the strategic changes brought about by Cinco's command. The season concludes with Ejen Alicia emerging as the Arena tournament champion and being awarded I.R.I.S.

5.2.2 Comic magazine

Extending the reach of the franchise, also accompanying the animation work is the instalment of comic magazines. Wau Animation, despite their primary specialty as an animation house, also invests in the publication of comic books both in physical form as well as digital format. Within the confines of comic book, several instalments have been published for public consumption.

5.2.2.1 *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali* (Ejen Ali Comic Magazines)

This publication is branded to be a magazine instead of a full fledge comic book because it showcases content beyond comic strips. Throughout the franchise, there are fifty-two (52) issues available for the comic magazine. Upon preliminary inspection, the comic magazine consists of several parts.

1. Latest news from Wau Animation. This section of the comic magazine, also known as "Monthly Cyber" documents Wau Animation's activities in public and/or announcements of various tournaments and competitions.

2. Additional information on *Ejen Ali* such as extended details about characters, weaponry, location and various other parts of the storyworld. Issue number 46, for example, includes profiles of two pillars leader, Ejen Zain of Neuro pillar and Ejen Djinn of Inviso pillar.

3. Main comic strips. This section takes up the majority of pages on the comic magazine. The main comic strip is a direct adaptation of the TV series. Particularly, the storyline is the same as in season 1 and season 2. In fact, it seems that each panel is a still image taken from the animation itself with a dialogue box embedded throughout the comic strips.

4. Minor comic strips. This is a short section, usually take up to six (6) pages that includes a content exclusive to *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali* that is not available in the animation. This section can have various versions with each version portray different kinds of story. *Ejen Ali: Sidemission* for example showcase a relaxing plot, barely touching any existing conflict in the main animation, that could entertain the reader. *Ejen Ali: Mission Animation*, on the other hand, serves as an informal education tool for Wau Animation as they portrayed, via the comic strip format, the in-universe characters explaining the technical part of producing an *Ejen Ali* animation. Some issues have included *Ejen Ali: Sidemission,* and some others replace this with *Ejen Ali: Mission Animation.*

5. Fan arts highlight. Wau animation also includes in a section to highlight fan art submitted to them in the comic magazine.

6. Activity section. There are also several quizzes, puzzles, and/or coloring artwork supplied to the comic magazine to increase its value to its readers.

5.2.2.2 *Komik Ejen Ali The Movie – Misi: Neo* **(Ejen Ali The Movie – Mission: Neo Comic)**

Different from the comic magazine, *Komik Ejen Ali The Movie – Misi: Neo* is much more committed to being a comic book than a magazine. The early page does contain a profile of some of the major characters in the feature film. Similar to the main comic strip section in the comic magazine, the rest of book is a comic strip in the form of adaptation of the feature film *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019). Wau Animation does redraw the comic strip in the introduction part of the film. However, the rest is an image taken from the feature film.

5.2.2.3 *Komik Ejen Ali: Sidemission* (Ejen Ali: Sidemission Comic)

This comic book is a compilation of all *Sidemission* minor comic strips in the comic magazine.

5.2.3 Mobile games

There are two mobile games obtained for this case study research. Both of these mobile games are unique from each other in terms of gameplay and story plot.

5.2.3.1 *Ejen Ali: Emergency*

This game includes four (4) storylines. Players can choose any of the storylines and finish the story. Each story is comprised of numerous levels. Players will be assigned with an in-game characters, giving the player ability to maneuver this character to fight robot, walk through maze and many other challenges.t. The four storylines are (1) *Mission: Neonimus,* (2) *Mission: Inferno*, (3) *Mission: Azurium,* and (4) *Mission: Ejen Ali The Movie*

5.2.3.2 *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena*

This game does not depict a set of storylines. Rather, it utilizes multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game format that encourages collaboration among players while adopting a capture-point game structure.

5.2.4 Trading card games

Trading card game (TCG) also known as *Ejen Ali: Misi Alliance* is a board game that utilizes a deck of cards and a set of rules. Each card showcases either character or device from *Ejen Ali* storyworld. While these cards are playable with friends and family, its artworks can be appreciated and may be treated as collectible.

5.3   In-depth interviews respondent

As outlined in the methodology chapter, findings from an in-depth interview with the production team are a valuable primary data source that could provide further information for this case study. Particularly, the data from in-depth interviews is expected to unearth insight into the practical implementation of transmedia and worldbuilding theory grounded in the Malaysian animation atmosphere. Additionally, the in-depth interviews will provide the opportunity for this case study to support findings from analyzing physical artifact; thus, solidifying the arguments that satisfy the second objective of the case study. Importantly, by engaging with the production team, this case study intends to seek answers to the third and final research questions that deal with the production process of a transmedia work. With that, this case study will eventually satisfy its third objective by inquiring about the production team creative approach in creating storylines, depiction, and portrayal in regard to *Ejen Ali* storyworld (given the involvement of multiple media formats),

5.3.1   Wau Animation, structure, and production pipelines

Before listing the selected respondents, I would like to include pertinent information regarding the organizational structure of Wau Animation. Additionally, I would also highlight relevant partnerships that can be important in the discussion chapters. This information was obtained from the interview itself. I am including this information prior to the discussion chapter because most of them are quite objective, and perhaps, is not subject to the opinion of respondents. Description of the organizational structure of Wau Animation and their production pipeline format will be the same for all respondents that work in that company. Importantly, I believe this information should be included this early in thesis so that it will preface the incoming discussion chapters and at the same time highlight the quality of selected respondents for this case study.

5.3.1.1 Relationship with external companies

Ejen Ali as intellectual property is owned by two companies which are Wau Animation Studio Sdn. Bhd and Primeworks Studio Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of a local media conglomerate called Media Prima Bhd (MPB). The animation works are done entirely by Wau Animation. The promotional aspect of the animation (either the TV series or film) is handled by PrimeWorks Studio. Despite being an animation studio, Wau Animation also undertaken the publication of their comic book product lines and the development of the trading card games (TCG). While Wau Animation and Primeworks Studio remain the producers of *Ejen Ali* comic book lines, the printing of the comic book, however, is outsourced to an external company which also listed as publisher of the comic book called Armoni Gold Mind Sdn Bhd; This is documented in every comic book released to the public.

The digital aspect of the franchise, which primarily includes the mobile games lines, is developed by Media Prima Bhd through their digital wing, Media Prima Digital the tournament aspect of the mobile games is organized by another subsidiary of Media Prima Bhd known as REV Media Group (RMG). This is documented in the games profile in the Google App Store available online. The merchandising lines of *Ejen Ali* franchise is licensed to various other external companies that is not specified in the interview session.

5.3.1.2 Production pipelines

Specific to Wau Animation, the process of creating an animation work either in TV series format, short film, and/or feature film will undergo a specified production pipeline. This production pipeline is documented in every animation work, particularly in the credit part of the animation. The in-depth interviews have included a clarification by the production team into the function of each production pipeline. The pipeline is summarized in stages in the following paragraphs.

Pre-Production: This stage marks the conceptualization and planning of the animation and its storylines. It begins with ideation, scriptwriting, and storyboarding to visualize the narrative. Character and background designs are created, laying the foundation for the animation's visual elements. This pre-production stage includes the director, writers and scriptwriters, storyboard artist, and concept artist.

Production: The animation comes to life in this stage, involving layout creation based on storyboards and animation execution by animators. Voice recording, music, and sound effects are integrated, contributing to the audio-visual of the project. This production stage includes animators, production supervisor, voice artist, sound engineer.

Post-Production: Final touches are applied in post-production, encompassing editing for smooth transitions and pacing, adding special effects to enhance visuals, color grading for consistency, and rendering the animation into its completed form. The last steps involve exporting the final product and preparing it for distribution across various platforms. Collaboration and communication remain crucial throughout, ensuring the project aligns with the initial vision and meets quality standards. This post-production stage includes video editors, special effect artist, lighting artists, render artist, story editors, and compositors.

5.3.2 Selected respondents

This production pipeline marks the quality of respondents when it comes to the inquiries of storytelling strategies. For example, those personnel in the writing stage might have better understanding of which certain storylines are developed better than those personnel in technical part of the animation. However, it does not mean that those beyond pre-production do not have insight into the multi-platform nature of *Ejen Ali* franchise. Since they are the ones that developed the animation, having to observe the performance of their work in the market may provide them with valuable insight into the lucrativeness of *Ejen Ali* franchise. Perhaps, their unique views that are different from the leader of the

company can provide this case study with varying perspectives about the transmedia phenomenon. Therefore, having respondents across varying stages of the pipelines strengthens the value of this case study.

Efforts to obtain contact information have been made both via corporate request and individual request. Requests are sent through various channels including email and social networking (like WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram) direct messages. Admittedly, it is challenging to get cooperation through corporate request. Most respondents respond through individual requests. This in turn affects the number of reachable potential respondents because I have to find contact information individually and submit requests. Specific to Wau Animation as the main producer and developer of *Ejen Ali* animation work, I found through an informant that there are negative prenotion surrounding interview request among Wau Animation staff. Due to accidental leaks in the past resulting from an interview, a staff member had been laid off creating a concern for other employers to agree to participate in an interview. However, some staff members in Wau Animation Studio are still willing to join. Out of twenty-eight (28) requests for an interview session, fourteen (14) personnel agree to participate.

As mentioned previously, *Ejen Ali* as a franchise consists of multiple media formats and as an intellectual property it is co-owned with Primeworks Studio, by extension Media Prima Bhd. Therefore, I also attempt to reach these two companies, preferably seeking personnel that fit the criteria determined in the methodology section. With the help of an informant, five potential respondents and/or corporate entity managed to be identified. Out of these five prospects, three individuals from Primeworks Studio that have been working closely with Wau Animation regarding *Ejen Ali's* content, particularly its TV series and film. One prospect is from the organizer of *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* e-sport tournament organizor, REV Media Group, a subsidiary of Media Prima Bhd that specializes in digital products.

The fifth prospect is *Ejen Ali's* comic book publisher, Armoni Gold Mind Sdn Bhd, in which I am seeking any staff member that has experience working with *Ejen Ali* content. Out of these five prospects only one bears fruitful result which is a request to Mr. Haikal, an individual from REV Media Group that have involvement in the development of *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* mobile games and organized an e-sports tournament for this game. There are no responses received from Primework Studio even though requests have been sent multiple times via email and social networking direct messages. An informant has speculated that this unresponsive treatment might be the result of a corporate restructuring that coincidently happened during the data collection period of this case study.

In summary, thirty-three (33) requests have been sent to potential respondents and fifteen (15) agree to participate in this case study research. As reviewed by Saunders and Townsend (2016), fifteen (15) respondents is sufficient for a qualitative study involving organization and workplace research as long as it is explained how the chosen participant enable research purpose to be met. Osborne and Grant-Smith (2021) also support by claiming that it is common to see in-depth interviews to include 5 – 25 participants. The fifteen (15) participants obtained for the case study are from diverse roles in the development of *Ejen Ali* franchise. In terms of production pipeline, there are respondents that represent pre-production, production and post-production stage. Additionally, in terms of media format, there are also respondent(s) that represent working on film, TV series, comic book, mobile games, and trading card game (TCG). With these diverse participants, data from in-depth interviews can be sufficient to assist in finding insights that satisfy the second and the third research objective.

Furthermore, the involvement of three co-founders/directors of Wau Animation of out five total directors as respondents of this case study solidify sources from in-depth interview. As transmedia studies primary deal with strategic storytelling technique involving multiple media formats, the insights taken from interviewing with leader of Wau Animation is crucial to comprehend transmedia employment in the context of Malaysian animation industry. Participants/respondents of this case study are summarized in the preceding paragraph. Note that while some respondents agree to disclose their identity for this research, there are others that specify to avoid that. For those respondents that want to anonymize their identity, a fake name (serve as an alias) is given so that references in text can be made.

Muhammad Usamah Zaid Yasin (Usamah Zaid)
Pre-production, Production | TV series, Film

Usamah Zaid is a co-founder of Wau Animation. With a bachelor's degree from Multimedia University (MMU), he made significant contributions to the success *of Upin & Ipin* animation at Les' Copaque Productions. Since 2013, he has played a pivotal role as the Co-Founder, CEO, Film Director, and Scriptwriter at Wau Animation, making and executing strategic decisions for the company's growth. Simultaneously, his involvement as a film director and scriptwriter ensures the outstanding quality of the products for public consumption, showcasing his commitment to excellence.

Mohd Faiz Mohd Hanafiah (Faiz Hanafiah)
Pre-production, Production | TV series, Film

Faiz Hanafiah is a co-founder, Chief Operating Officer (COO), and compositing & effect specialist at Wau Animation. Holding a bachelor's degree in Multimedia, Film, and Animation from Multimedia University (MMU), he brings a decade of experience from Les' Copaque Productions. Faiz oversees day-to-day operations, ensuring smooth and

budgeted functioning, maintaining timelines, and managing operational costs to prevent financial losses.

Fuad Md Din (Fuad)

Pre-production, post-production | TV series, Film, Comic Book, Merchandise

Fuad, a co-founder and Chief Branding Officer (CBO) at Wau Animation, holds a bachelor's degree in Multimedia (Virtual Reality) and Animation from MMU. Since the company's inception in 2013, Fuad has played a vital role in overseeing branding efforts for both the corporate entity and the popular *Ejen Ali* franchise. His responsibilities extend beyond animation, including the production of content and licensing products such as comic books and merchandise.

Reuban Singham (Reuban)

Post-production | TV series, Film

Reuban is an Editor at Wau Animation, bringing his expertise to the company since 2017. With a bachelor's degree in Cinematic Arts from MMU, he ensures the coherence and relatability of storytelling through meticulous editing. Reuban's keen eye for pacing and narrative intricacies contributes significantly to the overall quality of Wau Animation's productions.

Zuraida (pseudonym)

Post-production | TV series, Film

Zuraida is a former employee at Wau Animation from 2017 to 2020, served as a Junior Compositor and later as a Lead Compositor. Holding a bachelor's degree in Animation and Visual Effects from MMU, she compiled assets from animators and lighting artists, addressing visual discrepancies to enhance the final output.

Muhd Haikal Ismail (Haikal)

Game development, E-Sport organizer | Mobile Game

Haikal, with a background in Advanced Diploma in Multimedia Design & Illustration from The One Academy, transitioned from digital product and marketing roles to become the Esports Activation & Development lead (2021-2023) and currently the Corporate Branding and ESG Lead at REV Media Group. Related to *Ejen Ali* franchise, Haikal is a team leader that develop *Ejen Ali: Agent's Arena* mobile games. He is the one that proposes, leads, and coordinates the first E-Sports tournament for *Ejen Ali* franchise.

Adam Amiruddin (Adam)

Pre-production | TV series, Film

Adam is the creative director and member of the writing and scriptwriting team at Wau Animation since 2021. He holds a bachelor's degree in Multimedia (Virtual Reality) from Multimedia University (MMU). He is primarily responsible for script and creative writing for *Ejen Ali*.

Ahmad Farhan bin Mat Suhaimi (Farhan)

Production | TV series, Film

Farhan served as a Production Coordinator at Wau Animation from 2021 to 2023. With a bachelor's degree in Animation, Interactive Technology, Video Graphics, and Special Effects from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Farhan was key in maintaining communication, alerting to deadlines, resolving conflicts, and managing schedules.

Muhammad Hilman bin Mohamad (Hilman)

Pre-production | TV series, Film

Hilman has been a scriptwriter at Wau Animation since 2019. He holds a bachelor's degree in film and Animation from Multimedia University (MMU). He is primarily responsible for crafting compelling scripts for TV series and films, contributing to the narrative strength of Wau Animation's productions.

Dania (pseudonym)
Production | TV series, Film

Dania, who served as a Production Coordinator at Wau Animation from 2017 to 2023, holds a bachelor's degree in Animation and Visual Effects from Multimedia University (MMU). Responsible for managing production schedules and coordination, she oversaw various aspects of production management.

Hafsa (pseudonym)
Production | TV series, Film

Hafsa, who served as an Animator at Wau Animation from 2017 to 2022, holds a bachelor's degree in design technology (Animation) from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). She is responsible for the animation work for both TV series and films during her tenure at Wau Animation.

Muhammad Asrul bin Nasiruddin (Asrul)
Post-production | TV series, Film

Asrul has been a lead compositor at Wau Animation since 2017. With a diverse educational background, including a Diploma in Multimedia Application from Cosmopoint Johor Bharu and a bachelor's degree in Multimedia Technology from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), he leads the composition team, ensuring the seamless integration of assets and maintaining high-quality visual elements.

Faiz Salim
Pre-production | TV series, Film

Fadhil, who served as a Storyboard Artist at Wau Animation from 2018 to 2022, holds a diploma in Graphic Design and a bachelor's degree in Animation Film and Theater from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM). He played a crucial role in creating storyboards before the final animation process.

Kamarul (pseudonym)
Pre-production | TV series, Film. Trading Card Game (TCG)

Kamarul has been a storyboard artist and writer at Wau Animation since 2015. Holding a diploma in Art and Design from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Lendu and a bachelor's degree in art and design (Multimedia - Game) from UiTM Puncak Alam, he is responsible for drafting storyboards. He occasionally contributes to writing, assisting the concept and lighting departments, and developing trading card games for the *Ejen Ali* franchise.

Mohamad Safwan bin Abdul Hamid (Safwan)
Production | TV series, Film

Safwan has been contributing as a 3D and asset modeler at Wau Animation since 2019. With a background in graphic design from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), he is in charge of creating 3D models for backgrounds, utilizing assets from the concept team and translating them into the final visual elements of the productions.

In conclusion, this chapter has meticulously reviewed the data collection process preceding the two subsequent discussion chapters. It provided a general summary of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld, detailed the materials gathered for the case study research along with their summaries, and described the methods used to recruit respondents. Additionally, an overview of the participants who took part in the in-depth interviews was included. The exploration of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative was grounded in a thorough examination of diverse data sources, including physical artifacts and in-depth interviews conducted with the production team.

The two principal data sources — physical artifacts and interview — shaped the nature of the data under scrutiny. Physical artifacts, encompassing cultural products such as TV series, films, mobile games, comic books, and trading card games associated with the *Ejen Ali* franchise, were accessed through publicly available sources obtainable

through various means, including free content, paid subscriptions, or individual purchases. While physical artifacts drew from accessible sources, in-depth interviews presented a distinct method, requiring a collaborative approach and cooperation from the relevant parties. The procedural details of securing this cooperation were outlined in this chapter.

This chapter serves as a comprehensive repository, showcasing all the pertinent data amassed for this study. It provides a vital reference for the subsequent discussion chapters, offering readers insight into the diverse sources that inform the analysis. Additionally, the chapter illuminated the limitations and constraints encountered during the data collection process, ensuring transparency, and providing justifications for mitigating these constraints. These detailed considerations set a solid foundation for the analytical discussions to follow, ensuring that the study's conclusions are well-supported by robust and diverse data. The proceeding chapter will showcase the result of data analysis presented in thematic order. Chapter 6 will mostly deal with physical artifacts as its data source. It will employ analytical worldbuilding analysis techniques (as discussed in section 3.4) to explore the utilisation of worldbuilding to expand *Ejen Ali* storyworld and the same time ensure cohesiveness and immersion within the franchise. Chapter 7 and 8, on the other hand, will deal with data obtained through a series of in-depth interviews with the production team. Both chapters will shed light on the production team, primarily consist of Wau Animation staff members, perspectives and experience developing *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative.

CHAPTER 6: ENHANCING COMPONENT VALUE WITH WORLDBUILDING

This chapter examines the role of worldbuilding in the expansion of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative. The argument posited here focuses on how worldbuilding enhances the coherence and relevance of the varying component in *Ejen Ali* franchise. By embedding elements of narrative continuity, immersive engagement, and cultural authenticity, worldbuilding plays a crucial role in ensuring that each component contributes meaningfully to the overall transmedia experience. The discussion in this chapter will include a comprehensive analysis of worldbuilding practices within *Ejen Ali*, providing a nuanced understanding of its narrative, immersive, and cultural dimensions.

This chapter also attempts to illustrate the significance of worldbuilding in elevating the value proposition of every component within a transmedia franchise. Effective worldbuilding is more than just a creative endeavour; it is a linchpin that sustains audience engagement and satisfaction over time. As mentioned previously, perhaps, evoking reading pleasure through the exploration of story worlds, maintaining narrative consistency across diverse mediums, and fostering immersive experiences might be some of the ways worldbuilding provide value to each component within a transmedia franchise. In this dynamic realm, worldbuilding serves as a catalyst for enduring audience captivation, ensuring that each transmedia component possesses an intrinsic value to ensure its relevance in the media market.

In the methodology section, I have clarified the scope of this case study by listing components of *Ejen Ali* franchise. These components are published/produced in four types of media forms which are TV series, film, comic book, and mobile games. The examination upon these components is expected to satisfy the first objective of this research which is to explore the adoption of multiple media formats for the expansion of *Ejen Ali* franchise. Additionally, further exploration necessitates content analysis over these components to investigate its worldbuilding features and recognize any forms of

pattern that could satisfy the second research objective which is to examine the portrayal of worldbuilding element embedded within *Ejen Ali* franchise. I am taking lessons from Wolf (2014) regarding the importance and dynamic of story and world.

> while a story takes place in a world, it need not show us very much of that world... A world can have multiple stories set in it and need not be dependent on any particular story for its existence. However, story and world usually work together, enriching each other, and if an author has been careful in the construction of a story, the world will appear to exist beyond the immediate events, locations, and characters covered in the story (Wolf, 2014, p. 29).

Therefore, while I pay attention to the storylines and plots that exist in various publications/productions, I also take note on the depiction of *Ejen Ali* storyworld throughout every component within the scope of this case study research.

By Jenkins's logic, each component of a transmedia narrative, although developed to be standalone, need to have valuable contribution to the overarching narrative (Jenkins, 2006, 2011). As discussed before, this assertion highlights the importance for an additional and new component to act as an extension by expanding the encompassing grand narrative further. Agreeing with this notion, I am inclined to see that narrative aspects of a component should be taken seriously as it provides a crucial value that the audience seeks to enjoy. The interconnectedness, continuity, and complexity of transmedia works motivates further consumption among audience (Jenkins, 2006; Long, 2007; Richter, 2016). With that, I commit to be attentive towards the narrative of a given component and attempt to understand how it can be considered as self-contained yet contribute to any existing grand narrative.

On side of exploring the storyworld, I take note from Ekman and Taylor (2016) assertions that dynamic interplay among worldbuilding infrastructures and/or elements can provide an insight into worldbuilding strategies embedded in multiple works. Worldbuilding infrastructures can be defined as elements within the narrative that make or describe the storyworld in general or parts of the storyworld. Elements like characters, locations, supernatural laws, technologies, themes and many other can be considered as worldbuilding elements (Long, 2007; Wolf, 2014). I am interested in elements that repeatedly and consistently portrayed across two or more platforms and attempt to make sense of this strategy. Additionally, I am attempting to comprehend how the depiction of *Ejen Ali* storyworld works with narrative to enhance the value of a component regardless of its media form.

Upon inspection of various productions and publications (limited within the research scope) revolving around *Ejen Ali* franchise, I found that worldbuilding have facilitated in strengthening various components within *Ejen Ali* franchise with three distinct values which are narrative value, immersive value, and cultural value. In simplicity, I am arguing that the continuity in storylines from one medium to another increases the relevance of all involving components. Each component has its own unique plot, the existence of this continuity suggests a greater narrative arc encompassing the whole transmedia franchise. By embedding worldbuilding elements that facilitate this continuity, I assert that narrative value is embedded to the component making them valuable to the whole franchise.

Additional to the narrative value, I also make a case that worldbuilding provides necessary space for immersive value to be attributed to several components in *Ejen Ali* franchise. Borrowing from critical worldbuilding logic, worldbuilding itself refers to the strategic way elements of the storyworld are depicted in various works (Ekman & Taylor, 2016). With *Ejen Ali* franchise, I will illustrate that worldbuilding does not necessarily

work to expand an overarching narrative. Instead, worldbuilding can be used to provide material so that a form of immersive entertainment can be included considering the mode and affordance of a given media format. Thus, worldbuilding helps to widen the utility of a component in *Ejen Ali* franchise by enhancing its immersive quality.

Lastly, I will point out that in the case of *Ejen Ali* franchise, worldbuilding also serves to highlight the cultural value of several instalments in this franchise. Existing within the Malaysian animation industry, *Ejen Ali* franchise seems to be committed to be relatable to the Malaysian audience by embedding local cultural reference in various of its components. While some of this cultural depiction have connection with the overall narrative, there are also other depiction that is purely included to feature Malaysian cultural elements. I believe that this makes *Ejen Ali* franchise unique as a transmedia storytelling case. While worldbuilding has been utilized to achieve the standard of being transmedia work, it is also utilized to further enhance various components with cultural value that should resonate well with local audiences. Further explanation of these three values is written in thematic form beginning with the proceeding sub-section.

6.1 Embedding narrative value with immersive worldbuilding

Immersive worldbuilding within the *Ejen Ali* franchise serves as a crucial foundation, ensuring that each product within the franchise is poised to deliver a richer entertainment experience that transcends the boundaries of a single medium. Worldbuilding in this context extends beyond the mere creation of a canvas upon which narratives are painted; it entails a meticulous examination of how each element within the world serves a distinct purpose. This analysis of purpose-driven worldbuilding is essential, as it aligns with Ekman and Taylor (2016) concept of worldbuilding's role in supporting multiple storylines while emphasizing that the infrastructure of portrayed worldbuilding must also serve a purpose, rather than merely being a blind showcase.

Furthermore, the concept of immersion is also notably prominent within the realm of virtual and extended reality, encompassing video games, virtual reality, and augmented reality. Yan Breuleux, Bruno de Coninck, and Simon Therrien, for instance, utilized worldbuilding as a framework to analyse immersive storytelling employed through VR-based and full dome projects. Their research leads to an exploration of how the worldbuilding approach can influence the creation of immersive experiences (Breuleux, de Coninck, & Therrien, 2019). Similarly, there are various studies focus on associating immersive entertainment with VR, AR, or other forms of extended reality (see. Ichikawa, Tang, Takashima, & Kitamura; Misek, 2020; Silva & Brandão, 2021; Southwick, 2022).

However, confining the notion of immersion solely to physical, digital, or virtual interactivity is shortsighted in the context of worldbuilding. Immersion can be achieved regardless of media format (Hickling, 2021). Gordon Calleja (2011) recognizes that while immersion can occur with ergodic media like games, it can also be established in non-ergodic media like film and literature. When addressing immersion, the specificities of the medium in question should be acknowledged, along with how immersion is established within the boundaries of each medium (Calleja, 2011). Therefore, immersion transcends physical and virtual interactivity.

Immersion may represent a state of absorption in material, transporting individuals to imagined storyworld. As Kendall L Walton (1990) suggests, works of fiction should aim to engage the reader's mind as living experiences, allowing absorption and proper engagement with the challenges posed by the narrative. Ryan (1999) even argues that the sense of immersion can be heightened with lesser awareness of the hosting medium, be it a book, computer, or a video game console. Through meticulous construction and integration of various story elements, worldbuilding plays a crucial role in fostering a profound sense of immersion, ensuring that audiences are not merely spectators but immersed participants in the richly crafted narratives.

In the case of *Ejen Ali* franchise, I found that worldbuilding facilitates narrative continuity from one component to another given that each individual component is self-contained. However, I reflect Ryan (2017, p. 39) thought on the notion of "Mother Ship" and "optional peripherals" (as discussed in section 3.2) regarding the nature of component in a *Ejen Ali* franchise as a transmedia narrative. I observe that the TV series and film are the main transmedia document (or the Mother Ship) of the franchise as they contain the majority of the main narrative that are well coordinated with one another. However, there are also worldbuilding elements that facilitate this narrative embedded into other instalment such as the comic book and the mobile game which I argue may only serve as an optional peripheral in which those who have strong interest with the *Ejen Ali* storyworld can consume to deepen their immersion.

I want to clarify that the word "Ejen" is a Malay word that can be translated as agent. Many characters in the franchise have the word "Ejen" to their name because it is attributed to an individual that serves as a spy agent to an intelligence agency which I will discuss further later. For example, Ali is one of spy agents in storyplot; thus, he was given the name Ejen Ali, hence the name of the franchise. The three-seasoned TV series spanning for thirty-nine (39) episodes and the film instalment titled *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019) contain the majority of the main storyplot within the whole franchise. Additionally, while both instalments are standalone (meaning that it can be enjoyed without having to watch the other first), both plots are considered complimentary to each other as one would extend the story of the other. In terms of timeline, the TV series was released in 2016 (prior to the film instalment) and continues to air for two (2) seasons (totalling twenty-six episodes). The film instalment, on the other hand, premiered in 2019. Three years later, the latest season of TV series instalment, *Ejen Ali* season 3, was released in Disney+ Hotstar platform around mid-2022 and in mid-2023, it was aired on TV3, one of Malaysia's top broadcasting TV stations.

Ejen Ali TV series in season 1 primarily focusses on the protagonist, Ali, and his coincidental encounter with a weapon device, in the form of high-tech eyeglasses, known as Infinity Retinal Intelligence System (I.R.I.S.). Ali was introduced as a typical Malaysian primary school student without any prior background or skillset in physical combat. However, he does possess a good amount of dexterity and a sense of justice, as in the first episode (referring to figure 6.1), *Mission: I.R.I.S.*, he was shown to save chaotically, a bullied student.
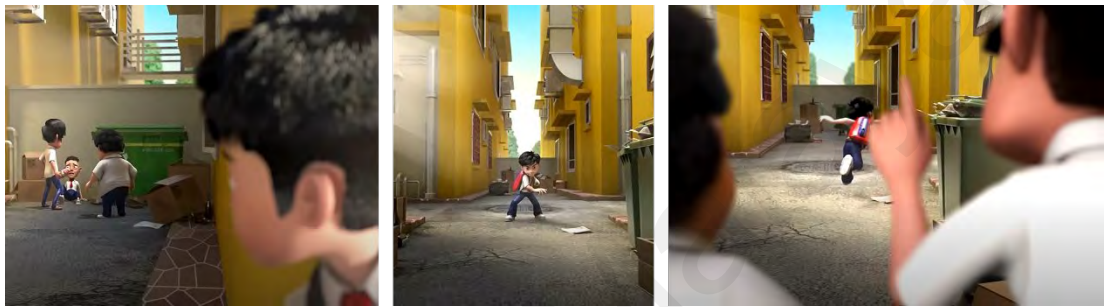
Figure 6.1: Ali attempted to save student and ran away when confronted [Television series episode]. (2016). Ejen Ali, "Mission: I.R.I.S" (Episode 1). Wau Animation

His unintentional encounter with I.R.I.S. exposed himself to a conflict between an intelligence agency known as "Meta Advance Tactical Agency" or M.A.T.A. and a villainous organization called "Numeros". It was revealed that I.R.I.S. was owned by M.A.T.A., and due to its capabilities, Numeros wanted to obtain I.R.I.S. and use it to pursue their malicious objectives.

Figure 6.2: I.R.I.S. imprinted to Ali for the first time [Television series episode]. (2016). Ejen Ali, "Mission: I.R.I.S" (Episode 1). Wau Animation

I.R.I.S. can only be imprinted on one individual at a time. Once it is imprinted on an individual, I.R.I.S. will only be functional to that individual. Figure 6.2 showcase when I.R.I.S. was activated for the first time and imprinted to Ali. It was depicted at the end of season one, *Mission: Override* (2017), that Numeros had to develop a special device to remove I.R.I.S. from Ali which shown in figure 6.3. Although Numeros managed to extract I.R.I.S. from Ali, they failed to keep the devices as they were forced to retreat because of the combat pressure by M.A.T.A. agents. Towards the end of this last episode, *Mission: Override* (2017) Ali had accidentally activated and registered I.R.I.S. for the second time forcing M.A.T.A. to continue observing Ali and maintain his membership as M.A.T.A. young agent.

Figure 6.3: Special device to extract I.R.I.S. from Ejen Ali [Television series episode]. (2017). Ejen Ali, "Mission: Override" (Episode 13). Wau Animation

Season 2 of *Ejen Ali* TV series continues the conflict of Numeros and M.A.T.A.. Having the realization that Ali was lacking in combat experience, M.A.T.A. had decided to enrol Ejen Ali in a training program to hone his skills as a spy agent. Within the training program, Ejen Ali had been introduced with more young agents that were enrolled into the same program. Although Numeros failed to get I.R.I.S. in season one, they managed to copy the underlying code of I.R.I.S. and imitate its capabilities by embedding the code

to a head gear worn by Numeros leader, Uno. This season ends with Uno death along with Ejen Zain, one of the four core leaders of M.A.T.A.. Although I.R.I.S. was one of the focal points of the plot in season one and season two, there were several minor conflicts that were resolved in a single episode rather than continuing from one episode to another. For example, in the second episode of season two, *Mission: Orientation* (2017), the conflict revolved around a member of young M.A.T.A. agent, Ejen Rudy, disapproval towards Ali's appointment as M.A.T.A. agents. For Ejen Rudy, Ali was unfit to be a spy agent because he was unskilled and useless as Ali tended to rely too much on I.R.I.S. to complete his mission. Being a minor conflict, Ejen Rudy disapproval was resolved at the end of this episode.

The film *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019) offered a different storyline and conflict compared to the TV series. It is worth noting that this film instalment premiered prior to the third and latest season of the TV series counterpart. Similar to the TV series and continuing from season 2, I.R.I.S. was again highlighted in the film plot. Early in the film, two newly introduced agents, Ejen Fit and Ejen Bobby, were shown to wear a prototype of an enhanced version of I.R.I.S. called I.R.I.S Neo during their attempt to assist Ejen Ali and his team on a mission. Prior to the film instalment, I.R.I.S. was understood as a unique device that cannot be replicated, which forced Numeros to attempt to steal it in the first two seasons of *Ejen Ali* TV series. The introduction of I.R.I.S. Neo was a shock to Ali, whom believed that I.R.I.S. had been the best and superior weapon owned by M.A.T.A.. Another important storyplot in the film was Ali's encounter with Nikki, which was a long-lost friend of his mother. It has been established in the TV series that Ali's mother had already passed away and he currently lived with his father, Dr Ghazali. The film features the backstory of his mother, Ejen Aliya who was also a M.A.T.A. agent. To Ali surprises, Ejen Aliya, his mother, was the one that developed I.R.I.S. during her time working with M.A.T.A..

In the film, the main conflict revolved around a rebellious group headed by Niki. This group consists of people from a place at the edge of Cyberaya, a fictional Malaysian city in *Ejen Ali* storyworld, called Pinggiran. These people were the victims of urbanization of Cyberaya which was the plan of its mayor, Dato' Othman. Frustrated that their home has been systematically demolished, Niki's group plan a revenge plot against Dato' Othman. Using her past relationship with Ejen Aliya, Niki takes advantage of Ali's naïve personality and uses him to get necessary resources for the revenge plot. Her plans materialized further when she got the key code of I.R.I.S., which was intended to be given to Ali, and proceeded to develop I.R.I.S.-like device to gain more firepower for the revenge plot. Niki's revenge plot failed at the end of the film due to Ali proficiency of using the original I.R.I.S.. At the end of the film, Ejen Ali had decided to give I.R.I.S back to M.A.T.A for better safekeeping.

In 2022, *Ejen Ali* franchise was expanded further with the released on the third season of *Ejen Ali* TV series spanning for thirteen (13) episodes. Different from the first and second season, the third season was released exclusively on Disney+ Hotstar in 2022 and then about a year later it was aired on TV3. With Uno death in season 2, Numeros have taken different leadership and continue to terrorize Cyberaya and sabotages M.A.T.A.'s agency. While their focus is not solely to obtain I.R.I.S., their malicious objective of taking control of M.A.T.A. and Cyberaya was still in motion. In season three, I notice that there are changes in roles between characters. With absent of Uno resulting with his death in season two, Numeros was headed by Cinco, Uno's right hand in the previous season. Added to that, with the absence of Dato' Othman resulting from hospitalization due to injury during Niki's attack in the film, newly appointed acting mayor, Dato' Hisyam was introduced in season 3. While the protection of Cyberaya was still a major task young M.A.T.A agents, season three continued the theme of young agents training added with an extra element. In season 3, additional young M.A.T.A

agents were introduced and this time the newly introduced batch were overseas candidates. This clearly suggests that the storyworld of *Ejen Ali* is about to be further expanded because it teases the idea and the possibility of other geographical locations existing beyond Cyberaya.

While the TV series and film instalment portrayed differing storylines, there was continuation in terms of storylines for both platforms. The three-season TV series instalment and the film instalment showed progress of worldbuilding by systematically showing parts of *Ejen Ali* storyworld. While the film instalment is intended to be standalone, some depiction in the film play a crucial role in the storylines of season 3. For example, the injuries of Dato' Othman resulting from Niki's attack in the film enable his right hand, Dato' Hisyam (whom previously had undertaken task outside of the city) to come back to Cyberaya and appointed as acting mayor in the third season. Another impactful example, perhaps, was the instance in the film that showed Ali giving up I.R.I.S. back to M.A.T.A.. With this scene, Ejen Ali, for the first time had to stop relying on I.R.I.S. to execute his mission. This allowed more room for growth for Ejen Ali as a central character in the third season. This continuation and systematic showcasing of *Ejen Ali* storyworld by TV series and film instalment convinced us that both instalments are a strong extension to the whole franchise.

Being a platform that showcases visually driven stories, both TV series and film instalments provide immersive entertainment experience; especially when the plots embedded in these two platforms are interrelated and intertwining with one another. There is also evidence in the texts that indicate opportunities for its fans to engage further with the narrative. I argue that this extended engagement with the content is driven by worldbuilding. It is also pertinent to consider geographical location that was portrayed in TV series and/or film as one of worldbuilding elements embedded in the text. In episode *Mission: Legacy* (2018, TV series, season 2, episode 13), there was a short instance,

shown in figure 6.4, where the location of M.A.T.A.'s Academy (one of M.A.T.A. educational facility) was visualized on a digital globe. It appeared that this facility, was in the southern part of the peninsular Malaysia.

Figure 6.4: Red dot denoting location of M.A.T.A's Academy serving as a clue to the location of Cyberaya City [Television series episode]. (2018). Ejen Ali, "Mission: Legacy" (Season 2, Episode 13). Wau Animation

Figure 6.5: Visual rendition of Cyberaya city potrayed in the animation [Television series episode]. (2016). Ejen Ali, "Mission: Blueprint" (Season 1, Episode 5). Wau Animation

Additionally, in season 1 episode 5, *Mission: Blueprint* (2016), there was another quick instance, shown in figure 6.5, that show the map of Cyberaya city itself on screen. Both instances did not include active dialogue among characters in the scene that discussed the location of Cyberaya and/or its geographical structure. But it is far from dysfunctional because, with the portrayal of this worldbuilding element, fans can have a record on the location of Cyberaya (a fictional city) located in Malaysia (a real nation)

embedding a sense of realism at the same time appreciating its geographical structure. Information such as the relative location among the urban area, forestry, rivers and seas, as well as bridge can be accessed and scrutinized with the existence of this depiction.

Moving onto the film, geographical location as part of the worldbuilding also plays a major role in the film storylines, at the same time providing valuable information to fans regarding Cyberaya. Niki and her henchman, who was the primary villain in the film stories live in the underdeveloped, northern parts of Cyberaya, called "Pinggiran". The depiction of Pinggiran pave ways for new interpretation of Cyberaya aside from its portrayal in the TV series as technologically driven prosperous city. Behind tall and magnificent buildings, as well as advanced security of Cyberaya, lies a place where its population struggles with poverty. Pinggiran as worldbuilding elements serves to provide a space where the major conflict of the film can take place; especially because Pinggiran was the birthplace of Niki. Due to the city government's inefficiency, Pinggiran was deprived from getting necessary resources to advance economically which halted infrastructure development. Disagreeing with the Cyberaya central government, particularly, the management of its mayor, Dato' Othman, Niki and her henchman steal weaponry and resources to arrange a coup to destroy Cyberaya. Pinggiran was central to this conflict. Even towards the end of the film, it was shown that the government had taken notice of Pinggiran and proceeded to channel more resources into this area. The depiction of maps and location in TV series, and the portrayal of Pinggiran in film provide opportunities for fans to connect the dot and immerse into *Ejen Ali* storyworld.

Apart from the Mother Ship, referring to TV series and film, comic book instalments exhibit the way worldbuilding can enhance instalment's narrative value. However, I believe that this component's contributions can be in the form of optional peripheral as they are not heavily influential to the main storylines of the franchise. This is because they only serve to add more information rather than extending any form of

narrative. Following Ryan (2017) logic on optional peripherals, audiences that have particular interest in I.R.I.S. or even the whole *Ejen Ali* storyworld might enjoy this extra information. *Ejen Ali* comic magazine, known as "*Majalah Komik Ejen Ali*" in Malay language, occupies a pivotal role within the multifaceted *Ejen Ali* franchise, complementing the popular *Ejen Ali* TV series throughout its first and second seasons. Figure 6.6 shows some of the comic magazines within *Ejen Ali* franchise. Each issue of this magazine has a unique title, utilizing the term "Misi" followed by the issue number. This naming convention accentuates the episodic nature of the magazine, making each release a distinct narrative instalment. Spanning a substantial 80 pages, each issue encompasses a variety of sections, collectively contributing to the immersive transmedia storytelling of the *Ejen Ali* universe.

Figure 6.6: Image of several comic magazines (issue 46 – 50)

The initial section of comic magazine is dedicated to metatextual worldbuilding. This segment provides readers with an in-depth understanding of the elements within the expansive *Ejen Ali* storyworld. For instance, *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 46* offers detailed insights into the characters Ejen Zain and Ejen Djin, *while Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 47* delves into the intricate facets of I.R.I.S. and its various versions (illustrated in figure 6.7), including "override mode," "override mode (white)," Ejen Aliya's version,

and "override mode (blue)." Notably, *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 48* presents other types of metatextual material in the form of concept art, providing a several character designs before it was finalized and included in the animation. This immersive approach empowers fans to deepen their comprehension of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld, making them active participants in its expansion. Beyond worldbuilding, the early pages of each issue also serve as a vital conduit for disseminating the latest news and updates from the production team behind the *Ejen Ali* franchise. This practice keeps readers informed about upcoming developments and fosters a sense of community among fans who eagerly await new episodes and releases.

Figure 6.7. Metatextual content in issue 48 providing information on versions of I.R.I.S. forms. From *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 47* (pp. 4-5), by Khai & Ain, 2017, Wau Animation Sdn Bhd & Primeworks Studios Sdn Bhd. Copyright 2017 by Wau Animation Sdn Bhd & Primeworks Studios Sdn Bhd.

Proceeding the metatextual content section, the publisher also includes in a section known as "Sidemission" exclusively available only in the comic magazine instalment. The *Sidemission* section within the comic magazine serves as a creative playground, offering short, light-hearted stories typically spanning six pages in the form of comic strips. The short plots in the *Sidemission* section may or may not be directly related to the main TV series or film storyline. Upon reading *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 47*, I come

across a *Sidemission* section title *Mamak Delivery* (the term "mamak" refers to a restaurant owned by Indian Muslim in Malaysia). Within this *Sidemission* episode, Ejen Ali and his uncle, Ejen Bakar were relaxing at home playing game video games. In his attempt to avoid eating his uncle's cooking, Ejen Ali offered to order food delivery service from a mamak restaurant, called "Mamak Maju". In the restaurant, Ejen Ali's teammate, Ejen Alicia seems to be working as waiter in Mamak Maju restaurant. Upon receiving the food order from Ejen Ali, she proceeded to tell the chef to prepare the food using an extra special recipe. The food was eventually delivered by one of M.A.T.A.'s leader, General Rama. During dinner, Ejen Ali realized that the food was too spicy for him. Ejen Bakar explains that the spiciness came from the extra special recipe prepared by the chef at Mamak Maju Restaurant.

The story depicted in *Sidemission: Mamak Delivery* may not have big enough conflict to pose an impact or influence on the major storylines of *Ejen Ali* animation franchise shown in the TV series and film instalment. Added with the fact that it is a short-length story, I am not convinced to consider the *Sidemission* section of the comic magazine as an extension. However, I cannot dismiss the *Sidemission* section as part of *Ejen Ali* storyworld because the portrayal of worldbuilding elements in *Sidemission* are consistent with the TV series and film instalment. It was explained in *Mission: Even* (2016, season 1, episode 3), as well as in the film *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019), that Ejen Alicia was an adopted daughter of General Rama and both of them were in the Mamak Maju family suggesting that Ejen Alicia's and General Rama's temporary employment with Mamak Maju is entirely possible. With this, the *Sidemission* section of the comic magazine instalment can be a vehicle of which worldbuilding elements like the character Ejen Alicia and General Rama can provide opportunities for reader to enjoy reading more material regarding *Ejen Ali* universe. Taking a break from watching heavy conflicts in the

extension part of the franchise, fans can have a relaxing story in the comic magazine while appreciating more portrayal of their favorite characters.

Additionally, the *Sidemission* section can occasionally be replaced by educational content known as "Misi Animasi" (Mission Animation). For example, *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 46* features a *Mission Animation* section titled *Misi Animasi: Audio* (Mission Animation: Audio), where existing characters in *Ejen Ali* universe explain the technical process of creating animations akin to the *Ejen Ali* TV series or its film instalment. While this section is educational in nature and may not have a direct impact on the primary narrative, they provide readers with additional content for enjoyment and offer valuable insights into the creative process behind the franchise; thus, consistent with my previous argument that the exclusive content in the comic magazine can provide further enrichment to its reader. In lieu of the *Sidemission* sections within the comic magazine, Wau Animation takes the initiative to release a separate comic book that compiles all *Sidemission* stories into one cohesive volume. This approach not only preserves the additional narratives but also allows fans to revisit and enjoy them as a unified collection. It reflects the studio's commitment to enriching the transmedia experience for its dedicated audience.

The central segment of the comic magazine consists of sequential comic strip panels that faithfully mirror the plot of the TV series, particularly for season 1 and 2. Interestingly, the dialogues between characters are presented within dialogue boxes, while the graphic panels consist of static images extracted from scenes in the TV series. This adaptation approach ensures variability in consumption experience as it allows fans to relive the main storylines in a different medium. For instance, *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 47* and *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 48* adapt the storyline from *Ejen Ali* TV Series, *Mission: Hope* (2018, season 2, episode 11), with each issue containing a distinct part of the story (see figure 6.8 for references). The concluding section of the comic

magazine offers a plethora of additional materials designed to engage and entertain readers. These materials include quizzes, puzzles, colouring pages, and submissions from fans' artistic creations. Additionally, a poster serves as a tangible souvenir within the magazine, enhancing the overall reading experience and allowing fans to further connect with the *Ejen Ali* universe.

Figure 6.8: Side-by-side comparison between comic magazine (misi 48) and TV Series (*Mission: Hope*). Left image is from *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali: Misi 48* (p. 58), by Khai & Ain, 2017, Wau Animation Sdn Bhd & Primeworks Studios Sdn Bhd. Copyright 2017 by Wau Animation Sdn Bhd & Primeworks Studios Sdn Bhd. Right image is from [Television series episode]. (2018). Ejen Ali, "Mission: Hope" (Season 2, Episode 10). Wau Animation

The *Ejen Ali* comic magazine series spans a remarkable fifty-two (52) issues, showcasing its enduring popularity and impact on fans. Wau Animation extends the transmedia narrative by releasing a longer comic book that adapts the storyline from the film instalment, *Ejen Ali the Movie: Misi Neo*. This adaptation maintains the direct adaptation approach, with the majority of the comic presented in 3D format due to the graphics being taken from its film counterpart that uses 3D animation style. In 2023, following the release of season 3 of the TV series, Wau Animation embarks on a new publishing venture with *Ejen Ali: Misi Arena*. Different from its predecessor, this fresh publication showcases the studio's commitment to delivering a refreshed look by meticulously redrawing scenes, instead of taking an image from the TV series or film,

from the third season in a comic format, offering fans a novel way to experience the latest adventures of *Ejen Ali*.

I also wanted to include another variation of comic book that carries worldbuilding value *Ejen Ali* franchise. Similar to *Sidemission* and *Mission: Animation*, another instalment of short comics was introduced by Wau Animation studio called "MATA Secret Files". This latest instalment made its digital debut on the webtoons.com platform, presented as a concise comic strip story, readily available to fans at no cost. Furthermore, only the initial two chapters, specifically *MATA Secret Files: Post Mission Neo, Logs (Part 1)* and *M.A.T.A. Secret Files: Post Mission Neo, Logs (Part 2)*, found their place in the final two issues of the *Ejen Ali* comic magazine, issues 51 and 52. This comic instalment takes on a distinctive role within the *Ejen Ali* universe. It serves as a medium to bridge narrative gaps between the main storylines presented in the *Ejen Ali* television series and films. While *Ejen Ali*'s *Sidemission* and *Mission: Animation* comics offer supplementary narratives that may or may not align with the central storyline, *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* provides essential narratives that significantly contribute to the overarching plot.

One of the most compelling aspects of *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* lies in its ability to fill narrative gaps within the *Ejen Ali* universe. A prime example is seen in the story arc titled *Post Mission Neo, Logs (Part 1 & 2)*. In the *Ejen Ali* film, viewers were left with an emotional revelation: Ejen Bakar had granted Ejen Ali access to internal M.A.T.A. records, particularly those related to Ali's mother, Ejen Aliya. This memorable plot point is further explored in *Post Mission Neo, Logs*, where Ejen Bakar entrusted Ali with a USB drive containing additional video logs from Ali's mother, shedding light on her involvement in the development of a weapon she used in combat. Furthermore, the comics address unresolved storylines from the TV series. In *Post Mission Neo, Logs*, the story of Ejen Rizwan's nanobot infection and the efforts to cure him are continued, setting the

stage for a scene in *Mission: Arena* (2022, TV series season 3, episode 1) where Ejen Rizwan woke up from his treatment and realized that he was only eighty-one (81) percent cleared of the invasive nanobot. This narrative continuity not only engages fans but also underscores the significance of *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* in advancing the overall storyline.

In addition to filling narrative gaps, *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* serves as a platform for character development and backstory exploration. Several characters in the *Ejen Ali* universe receive their moment in the spotlight. For instance, *File 002: Aaron (Part 1 & 2)* delves into the backstory of the enigmatic and villainous Dr. Aaron Edison, shedding light on his motivations and actions. Similarly, *File 003: Alicia (Part 1, 2, 3, & 4)* offers insight into Ejen Alicia's journey before she became a field agent, adding depth to her character. Moreover, *File 005: Mission Air Hitam (Part 1, 2, 3, & 4)* takes readers on a nostalgic trip to the past, showcasing the early missions of Ejen Bakar, Ejen Gheeta, Ejen Karya, and Ejen Leon. This flashback not only strengthens the camaraderie between these characters but also provides context for their mentorship roles in the existing storylines.

One of the remarkable aspects of *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* is its incorporation of worldbuilding elements that seamlessly tie into the major storylines of the *Ejen Ali* TV series and film. These elements include organizations, technology, and geopolitical dynamics, all of which contribute to a comprehensive and immersive narrative experience. For instance, the revelation that Yayasan Peneraju (Peneraju Foundation) is funding the developmental project for Pinggiran adds a layer of complexity to the *Ejen Ali* world, hinting at larger geopolitical forces at play. The versatility in worldbuilding and storytelling approaches exhibited by Wau Animation in *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* underscores the potential of the comic medium as a powerful tool for enriching narrative universes. By seamlessly weaving together supplementary narratives, character backstories, and worldbuilding elements, *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* not only enhances the reading experience but also exemplifies how worldbuilding can be harnessed to transcend

media formats, ultimately deepening the connection between fans and the Ejen Ali universe.

      Ejen Ali comic instalment (in various applications) serves as a cornerstone within the transmedia storytelling of the *Ejen Ali* franchise. While the comic magazine (*Majalah Komik Ejen Ali*) primarily adopts the main storylines from the TV series and films, it also incorporates worldbuilding elements and additional narratives through *Sidemissions*, *Mission: Animation* and *M.A.T.A. Secret Files* which then lead to a webtoon platform. This approach enhances fan engagement and deepens the immersion into the *Ejen Ali* storyworld, making readers active participants in the expansion of the narrative. Through metatextual worldbuilding, innovative *M.A.T.A. Secret Files*, and adaptations of the core narrative, *Ejen Ali* comic magazine strengthens the transmediality of the *Ejen Ali* franchise, providing fans with multiple avenues to engage deeply with the storyworld.

6.2   Providing space for immersion

While the TV series and film of the franchise provides space to showcase and grow *Ejen Ali*'s narrative plots and storylines, other instalments still contribute to provide immersive entertainment experience to consumer. I argue that while mode and affordance of a given media form can provide immersion, the worldbuilding aspect embedded in a component also plays a crucial role to facilitate immersive entertainment to user. I take lessons from Wolf (2014) regarding the concept of immersion given the context of worldbuilding and transmedia storytelling. Immersion can be in three distinct forms. The first is physical immersion, where the user is physically surrounded by the created space (Wolf, 2014). Next, sensual immersion focuses on what users see and hear as part of the controlled experience (Wolf, 2014). And lastly, conceptual immersion relies on the audience's mental engagement, allowing them to vicariously enter the imagined world given sufficient descriptive detail (Wolf, 2014).

The *Ejen Ali* animation franchise also ventured into the realm of mobile gaming, allowing fans to dive deeper into the captivating *Ejen Ali* storyworld. With that, this section is proceeding further with the analysis on worldbuilding elements within *Ejen Ali* mobile games and their pivotal contribution to creating an immersive entertainment experience. By scrutinizing the game plots and the portrayal of various worldbuilding elements, I will unveil how these elements serve as catalysts for heightened immersion. This analysis aligns with the concept of transmedia narratives, as observed in Menard's research on the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). *Ejen Ali* mobile games adeptly utilize worldbuilding elements to interconnect narratives across multiple platforms within the franchise, providing fans with a cohesive and engaging storyworld.

Ejen Ali mobile games consist of two primary instalments: *Ejen Ali: Emergency* and *Ejen Ali: Agent's Arena*. I come to terms that *Ejen Ali: Emergency* introduces multiple storylines, each comprising numerous levels, and assign players the role of controlling various characters within the expansive *Ejen Ali* universe. For *Ejen Ali: Agent's Arena*, the focal contribution regarding the worldbuilding in the introduction of Battle Arena and its gamification which was later adopted into storyline in the season 3 of the TV series. These additional materials embedded in the game instalment extend the storyworld beyond the confines of the TV series and films, offering fans additional material to explore.

There were four in-game storylines (that could work as a non-serialized episode) in *Ejen Ali: Emergency* mobile games. Each storyline has a unique way of illustrating how worldbuilding serves as a vehicle to provide immersion for fans to dive into the storyworld.

1. *Mission Neonimus*: In this storyline, Neonimus, a mischievous hacker, takes control of a M.A.T.A. facility, leading to widespread chaos. Players can assume the roles of characters such as Ejen Ali, Ejen Bakar, and Comot as they strive to rescue themselves and regain control of the facility. This storyline offers a unique perspective not explored in TV series or films, thereby enriching the storyworld. Notably, Neonimus is a character present in both the TV series and the game, bridging the narrative across different media formats and further enhancing the immersion for fans.

2. *Mission Inferno*: The conflict centres around the Cyberaya Geothermal Power Plant, which is one of several power plants in Cyberaya. Notably, this location was introduced in the game and was not mentioned in TV series or film. However, there were other power plants mentioned in TV series. In the TV series episode *Mission: Gegas Protocol* (2016, season 1, episode 7), the power plants discussed were the solar power plant, hydroelectric power plant, and wind power plant. Additionally, while this episode mentions Numeros' attempt to steal Azurium, the game *Mission Inferno* provide different yet quite similar storyline, showcasing Trez's pursuit of geothermal energy, instead of Azurium (as in episode *Mission: Gegas Protocol*) to develop new weaponry for Numeros. This distinction highlights how the mobile game expands the storyworld by introducing previously unexplored elements and providing additional context regarding the pursuit to obtain power and weaponry by the villain, Numeros organization.

3. *Mission Azurium*: This storyline introduces the Snake Gang, a new set of villains who collaborated with Numeros and Neonimus to steal Azurium. Players can control Ejen Ali, Ejen Rizwan, and Ejen Alicia. The conflict surrounding Azurium serves as a unifying worldbuilding element, connecting the game, TV series, and film.

4. *Mission: Ejen Ali the Movie*: Unlike the other three games in *Ejen Ali: Emergency*, *Mission: Ejen Ali The Movie* does not feature a distinct storyline. However, what sets this game apart is its remarkable ability to allow fans to immerse themselves further in one of memorable scene from the film. In this game, players can relive the heart-pounding sequence in the film where Ejen Ali and his team jumped from a moving airplane, skydived, landed on another moving airplane, engaged in intense combat with adversaries inside the plane, and ultimately completed a mission. This sequence aligns precisely with the film's storyline, offering fans the unique opportunity to actively participate in the action they previously witnessed on the big screen. This demonstrates the commitment of Wau Animation to ensure that worldbuilding elements are utilized to enhance the immersion of the storyworld, even in scenarios where the plot remains consistent with the film.

Following the release of *Ejen Ali: Emergency*, another mobile game was produced and launch in mid-2021 called "*Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena*". This new game instalment is a standout addition to the franchise, impressively introducing a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game format that encourages collaboration among players while adopting a capture-point game structure. Distinguishing itself from *Ejen Ali: Emergency*, this game doesn't incorporate traditional storylines. Instead, it introduces a novel worldbuilding element—the concept of the battle arena itself. Intriguingly, the concept of the battle arena introduced in the game *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* later becomes a central worldbuilding element in season 3 of the *Ejen Ali* TV series, released in 2022, a year after the game's

launch. In this season, young M.A.T.A. agents from both Cyberaya and beyond were brought together to participate in training and competitions held within the battle arena. The portrayal of the battle arena as a gaming concept and its subsequent portrayal as a competitive arena for young M.A.T.A. agents allow fans to delve deeper into a specific aspect of the storyworld. While they can relish watching their favourite characters engage in combat within the battle arena, fans can also actively participate in these combat scenarios through gameplay. This dual experience underscores the notion that crafting the right worldbuilding elements can indeed facilitate immersion and enhance fan engagement with the storyworld.

Apart from the unique ways in which each game has demonstrated the role of worldbuilding in enhancing immersion, I also seek to explore the dynamic synergy among these worldbuilding elements within the *Ejen Ali* universe as they were portrayed in game format. I believe that this interplay serves as a driving force behind providing fans with a more immersive and seamlessly integrated entertainment experience. Notably, *Ejen Ali* mobile games effectively incorporate key worldbuilding elements, encompassing characters, locations, lore and history, technologies, and environments, all of which play crucial roles in facilitating the immersive experience as outlined below.

1. Characters: Players can take control of a variety of characters from the *Ejen Ali* universe, allowing them to experience the storyworld from different perspectives. The inclusion of diverse characters enhances immersion as fans can engage with their favourite agents.

2. Locations: The games faithfully recreate familiar locations, such as the Cyberaya Geothermal Power Plant, adding depth to the storyworld. These locations serve as pivotal settings for conflicts and seamlessly tie into events from the TV series.

3. Lore and History: Worldbuilding elements like Azurium and the Snake Gang connect the games to the broader *Ejen Ali* narrative. The consistent use of lore and history across different media platforms reinforces the storyworld's cohesion.

4. Technologies: The inclusion of gadgets and weaponry in the games elevates the immersion factor. Players can utilize these technologies, further immersing themselves in the world of M.A.T.A.

5. Environments: The games faithfully recreate environments and scenarios witnessed in the TV series and films, fostering a sense of familiarity and continuity.

The *Ejen Ali* mobile games effectively leverage worldbuilding elements to heighten the immersive experience for fans. Through the incorporation of characters, locations, lore, technologies, and environments, these games deepen the connection between players and the *Ejen Ali* storyworld. *Ejen Ali* fans can not only passively enjoy the franchise through viewing but also actively engage with the storyworld through gameplay, resulting in a coordinated and immersive entertainment experience. The expansion of the *Ejen Ali* universe into mobile gaming underscores the franchise's commitment to providing fans with diverse and engaging storytelling experiences.

6.3   Incorporating cultural value with worldbuilding

Apart from narrative value and immersive value, I also want to make an assertion that in the case of *Ejen Ali*, worldbuilding plays a role in incorporating cultural value to various components within the transmedia franchise. As this study is contextualized in the Malaysian animation industry, I recognize that *Ejen Ali* franchise should be examined in relation to the Malaysian cultural background. Following up upon this, I reflect Wolf (2014, p. 17) articulation on 'the philosophy of possible world' to understand the paradigm of worldbuilding strategies in *Ejen Ali* franchise. Many popular fictional storyworld like J.R.R. Tolkien's *Middle Earth* or George Lucas's *Star Wars* exist in the

form of secondary world where it is distinguishable from the real world equipped with its own rules and natural laws (Wolf, 2014). While *Ejen Ali* storyworld is different from the real world with its own hyper advance technologies, I argue that it is not suitable to be considered as secondary world. This is because some aspects of the storyworld especially the strong depiction of cultural element imitates the real world; thus, invoking a sense of realism in the franchise.

Alternative to secondary world, possible world philosophy essentially refers to various ways the world could have been and not just the way it actually is (Ryan, 1991, 2017; Wolf, 2014). Instead of producing new and unique storyworld to host the narrative, producer of *Ejen Ali* situates *Ejen Ali* narrative in a real country which is Malaysia but proceed to extrapolate its ontological status by incorporating technological advancements that are far more progressive and futuristic than the actual world. This is consistent to Ryan (2017, p. 33) thought that "the coming-into-being of possible world is to associate them with future states of the real world". Although Cyberaya (the city that *Ejen Ali*'s narrative mostly takes place in) is fictional, there are worldbuilding elements that are taken from Malaysia especially referring to its local culture.

Some cultural worldbuilding elements are embedded in the main narrative to enrich the storytelling aspect of a component in *Ejen Ali* franchise. An example to illustrate this is the portrayal of 'Mamak' restaurant in *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019, film). The term 'Mamak' is a local reference to a restaurant operated by Indian Muslim. It is a common place for Malaysian despite age group to enjoy local food and beverages with a touch of south Indian influence while having to spend time with friend and family (K. Abu Bakar & Farinda, 2012). In the film, there is a dance number portrayed as a comedic scene where minor supporting characters (who are the restaurant workers) dance to a song called *Mamak Maju* which is also their restaurant name. The dance itself incorporate several local cultural references including the depiction common Malaysian staple such

as Teh Tarik (hot milk tea) and Roti Canai (flattened bread cooked on a flat stove) as well as the way they are prepared.

Additionally, the incorporation of 'Mamak' as part of *Ejen Ali* storyworld is further referenced in the comic book component in the franchise. Note that there is an inclusion of a short and playful dimension to the comic book called *Sidemission* that exhibits light-hearted comic strips. The comic book issue 47 features an episode of *sidemission* titled *Ejen Ali Sidemission: Mamak Delivery*, a short comic story depicts Ejen Ali's humorous dinner experience after ordering food from the same mamak restaurant depicted in the film. This indicates the producer's commitment to ensure local culture is consistently portrayed in the franchise.

In fact, *sidemission* section in the comic book seems to be utilized as a worldbuilding vehicle for cultural references that may resonate well with local audience. *Sidemission: Misi Merdeka*, translated as 'mission independence', in comic book issue 50 display frontliners during Covid-19 pandemic and the celebration of national Independence Day. Following similar value, *Sidemission: Patriotisme* illustrate the in-universe characters engaging with discussion about the National Independence Day and the symbolism of choosing Bunga Raya (Hibiscus Rosa-sinesis flower) as the national flower of Malaysia. In addition to that *Sidemission: Misi Raya*, *Sidemission: Ali & Ramadan, Sidemission: Ali & Syawal, Sidemission: Azam Ramadan, Sidemission: Pagi Syawal,* and *Sidemission: Ketupat* showcase local references on the culture of fasting in the month of Ramadan as well and the cultural enjoyment of celebrating the end of fasting in the month of Syawal through Eid-ul-fitr festival. In this array of *Sidemission* sections, various cultural aspects are depicted as part of the storyworld including traditional garments, festival foods, and cultural events.

Examples listed above serve as evidence to posit that worldbuilding provides utility beyond facilitating narrative growth and immersion. The case of *Ejen Ali* has shown that worldbuilding can be used to incorporate cultural value to a given component enhancing their value to the whole franchise. In the case of Mamak Maju dance number in the film, a comedic and relatable scene is offered to the audience as a way to make the story more interesting. Impressively, this comedic scene even went viral across social media after the premiere of the film indicating its prevalence in the Malaysian society (Azuar, 2019); thus, supporting the claim that worldbuilding can facilitate cultural value to a component making them valuable and relevant to audience in media market.

In the pursuit of our study's objectives, I have meticulously examined the intricate interplay of worldbuilding elements within the *Ejen Ali* transmedia franchise, shedding light on their multifaceted roles and interactions. Through extensive data analysis, the identification of recurring elements across various platforms, and the meticulous structuring of our findings, I have unveiled the dynamic synergy of worldbuilding components that form the backbone of the franchise, enabling it to deliver a profoundly immersive entertainment experience. Both *Ejen Ali* television series and film instalments, as visually driven storytelling platforms, stand as immersive spectacles. Their interconnected and intertwined plots foster a richly engaging experience for audiences, inviting them to delve deeper into the narrative. I contend that this extended engagement with the franchise is inherently driven by the art of worldbuilding, which serves as the connective tissue binding these mediums together.

The analysis of the *Ejen Ali* franchise reveals the pivotal role of worldbuilding in enriching its narrative, immersive, and cultural values. Through a comprehensive examination of various productions and publications within the franchise, I have demonstrated how worldbuilding serves as a foundational element that strengthens the interconnected components of the franchise. Firstly, the exploration has underscored the

significance of worldbuilding in enhancing the narrative value of the *Ejen Ali* franchise. By establishing a coherent and consistent storyworld across different mediums, the franchise achieves a greater narrative arc that transcends individual plots. This continuity not only adds depth to each component but also contributes to the overarching narrative cohesion, making the franchise more compelling and engaging for audiences.

Moreover, I have explained how worldbuilding creates opportunities for immersive experiences within the *Ejen Ali* universe. Drawing from critical worldbuilding principles, I also have illustrated that worldbuilding goes beyond expanding the narrative; it also enriches the immersive quality of each component. By strategically depicting elements of the storyworld to suit the mode and affordance of different media formats, worldbuilding enhances the immersive engagement of audiences, making their experience more captivating and memorable. Furthermore, the analysis has revealed the cultural significance embedded within the *Ejen Ali* franchise through worldbuilding. As a prominent presence in the Malaysian animation industry, the franchise demonstrates a commitment to incorporating local cultural references into its components. These cultural depictions not only add authenticity to the storytelling but also establish a connection with the Malaysian audience. By celebrating Malaysian culture and heritage, the franchise distinguishes itself as a unique transmedia storytelling endeavor, resonating deeply with local audiences and fostering a sense of cultural pride. The next chapter will investigate aspects of transmedia production and the implementation of exploratory worldbuilding revolving *Ejen Ali* franchise.

CHAPTER 7: TRANSMEDIA PRODUCTION AND EXPLORATORY WORLDBUILDING

This chapter examines the transmedia production of the *Ejen Ali* franchise and the exploratory worldbuilding strategy implemented by the production team. It is expected to satisfy the first objective of this thesis, which is to explore the adoption of multiple media formats for the expansion of the *Ejen Ali* franchise by examining the production team's commitment to the transmedia production paradigm. Additionally, this chapter is also intended to satisfy the third objective by looking into the engagement with the production team behind *Ejen Ali*, primarily composed of staff from Wau Animation. Through interviews conducted with key members of the production team, this chapter will outline the findings regarding the development of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative and the exploratory nature of its worldbuilding process. The discussion will commence by revealing Wau Animation's steadfast commitment to a multi-platform structure for *Ejen Ali*, highlighting the studio's strategic approach to engaging audiences across diverse media channels. Subsequently, the exploratory nature of the worldbuilding approach employed by Wau Animation will be expounded upon, shedding light on the creative processes and methodologies involved in shaping the narrative universe of *Ejen Ali*.

7.1   Commitment to transmedia production

As shown in chapter 6, *Ejen Ali* franchise in the form of transmedia narrative encompasses various works involving multiple media format. Importantly, these works are built in relation to another creating an interconnected and cohesive reading experiences for existing fans and new audience to immerse themselves in. This coordination is argued to be structured in tandem with worldbuilding logic in which narrative elements of the *Ejen Ali's* transmedia universe is strategically portrayed across varying works as the franchise progress to unify them into one single storyworld. While this thesis textually reviews the portrayal of *Ejen Ali's* storyworld through worldbuilding practice utilizing content

analysis, this thesis also attempts to explore the adoption of this practice through an authorial perspective. Several in-depth interview sessions have been conducted with members of the production teams to assess the underlying motivations for adopting this practice and as well as its production process.

Based on responses by the core team production team members (pre-production team) as well as some input from the supporting team (production and post-production), it seems that adopting several media format as part of a content franchise, especially in the animation business, is an obvious and logical way to assert relevance in the content market. Respondents from the pre-production team as well as those who also hold managerial positions in Wau Animation seem to be conscious and aware of the global trend of developing an array of works in multiple platforms to expand a franchise.

> During the launch of *Ejen Ali* in 2016, it was a global movement, like a 360-degree content approach. If you look at various media platforms, broadcasters want to create content that is all-encompassing, meaning it's present everywhere. That's why there's a game, a website, a YouTube channel, vlogs—all to cover everything under one IP. If you look at an obvious example, Marvel did this with Avengers. When Avengers was successful, they expanded with TV series like Agents of Shield. Then, on Netflix, there were shows with hints about the Avengers. It became a global trend, but it's true that the cost to produce that is higher. So, Wau Animation partnered with Media Prima, and it seems that we wanted to create content that covers all aspects. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726 / **excerpt 7.1.0.001**)

As mentioned by the head of the company, Mr. Usamah (in excerpt 7.1.0.001), the utilization of multiple media format is inspired by a western practice, particularly in the Hollywood exemplified with the Marvel company and their well-known Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise. Additionally, Mr. Amir (excerpt 7.1.0.002) attributed the adoption of multiple platforms in *Ejen Ali* franchise as a biproduct of learned experiences obtained from working with an established local industry player.

Reflecting upon discussions in chapter 2 of this thesis, adoption of multiple media channel among animation firms in Malaysia is the result of adhering to the demands of the current mediascape so that their production is relevant and competitive in the market driven by foreign influence, and availability of proper technologies and expertise. In the case of *Ejen Ali* franchise, this notion is especially applicable as the production team's effort to adopt multiple media format is guided by foreign production trend as well as generational experiences and expertise in operating in domestic market.

> I have to give credit for this to my former boss, Tuan Haji Borhan. When he started *Upin & Ipin*, he felt that it wasn't a taboo idea (adopting multiple media format). We (the Malaysian) had cartoons before *Upin & Ipin* came out, like *Usop Santorian*, *Anak-anak Sidik*. But sadly, those cartoons came out, and that was it. They didn't go any further. So, my former boss, who we used to call "uncle," wanted this to last. So, he took the Disney approach as they were very strong in merchandising. He believed that with good merchandise, people would become more familiar with the IP, and people would grow to love it. They'd know the IP is still around. So, he was the one who really wanted this. He said, "With this IP, let's not just make cartoons. Let's make products." Since Usamah and the gang were from Les' Copaque (producer of *Upin & Ipin*) back then. (Adam Amiruddin, AA20230313/ **excerpt 7.1.0.002**)

The philosophy behind the incorporation of various media format to expand a media franchise mimicking the concept of transmedia storytelling is widely accepted practice among the production team even though most of them works in animation-based production company. One member has said that the production team are aware of the additional cost that this practice might incur. Yet, venturing into this production paradigm is sought after and worth the effort.

> But in terms of publishing, that's challenging. And then, in terms of production, like, how big do we want to make the book, how many do we want to make, in what style, and who do we want to publish with? Who is willing to help publish things like this? So, it depends. Comics, for example, or merchandise, who will be the best option as vendor? Who do we want to take? Which vendor agrees to do it, and is the vendor capable of doing it? How big is their marketing? So, factors like that are challenging to think about and solve. Additionally, when creating extra content like Vlogs, it's challenging in terms of production, because at the same time, we're working on the current production, but also need to squeeze in time to do that extra work, which is an extra workload, to put it simply, for other things. Hmm, it's tough. Also, besides that, when it comes to dealing with clients, we have client outsource work, and they ask Wau to help with that. That's also the same extra workload, like how to manage the team's time, how the team can produce within the time set by the client. These things are quite challenging. Yes, of course, you have to work overtime sometime, and you have to be able to adapt a lot. It is a big challenge. (Farhan, AF20230408 **/ excerpt 7.1.0.003**)

Interesting to note that, most respondents do not explicitly refer to the terms 'transmedia storytelling' and/or 'worldbuilding' when describing this trend. However, they pose a substantial understanding of business logic behind this global trend. This would suggest that there is a gap between theoretical comprehension and practical understanding of this production concept among the Wau Animation staff members, even for C-Level personnel. Nonetheless, it is evident that the commitment to develop content in various formats is intended from the beginning. Usamah Zaid (in excerpt 7.1.0.001) even mentioned that the intention to partner with Media Prima (big media conglomerate) is to accommodate this commitment. Mr. Usamah also stated his understanding of why this practice is crucial for their success.

> In a way, you could say that when you create content like this, your reach
> is broader. You get a community, a community of comic readers, and you
> get more people to know about that IP. That's how it is. I'm not saying it's
> the perfect plan or anything; we tried trial and error, and thankfully, some
> things worked out. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.1.0.004**)

This understanding is also shared by the other members of the post-production team. Several members of the team have expressed their approval of implementing this tactic and proceed to articulate the logic behind establishing *Ejen Ali* presence across varying media formats as part of the franchise expansion.

> The advantage is you get to reach a wider band of audience because let's
> say we have our show on Netflix, we also have our show on Disney, we
> also have our show on multiple satellite broadcasts. And we also have
> TikTok, we also have Instagram, we've got Facebook, we've got Telegram,
> we also have Twitter. (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.1.0.005**)

It's a super good idea. I mean, any title we create is marketing material for fans to watch. When they like it, that's when merchandise comes out, and that's when we make money. Yes, that's one of the revenue streams. And as you said, we go into games. Yes, we want to make sure we maximize our revenue as much as we can. From there, we can develop more content, hold more tournaments, and update the game. If one of these elements doesn't connect, then it can't grow. (Haikal, MH20230220/ **excerpt 7.1.0.006**)

The reason is these platforms are not just about content; they're more about marketing. We want to attract new fans and also serve the existing ones. Nowadays, kids are all on TikTok. After that, TikTok can also generate some income. So, we see it as an opportunity not only to entertain the fans but also to introduce *Ejen Ali* to a wider audience, like in the case of games. Some people prefer playing games over watching TV or movies. So, it's another avenue for us to spread the word about *Ejen Ali*… animation is not just about creating its IP for movies or TV series. It contributes to many other aspects that can be derived from a single animation project. As mentioned before, it can produce games, comics, merchandise, and even contribute to tourism. It helps promote tourism for the country while introducing Malaysian culture abroad. (Dania, DM20230330/ **excerpt 7.1.0.007**)

Usually, it's about getting revenue because if it's just TV, it's difficult to survive, : Even if you look at other IPs, they make things like school books, shirts, because when it comes to movies, the profit seems big, like thirty million, but don't forget about government taxes, and dividing it with this, and with the cinema's profit, how much is it because we share with Media Prima. It's like cutting the cake, that's it. So, whether you like it or not, you have to do something else. At least for exposure (Faiz, FS20230624/ **excerpt 7.1.0.008**)

According to several team members, there are varying reasons for the incorporation of multiple media formats for *Ejen Ali* franchise. These reasons gravitate towards economic logic especially in terms of the business aspect of the franchise. Understandably as one of the core directors and CEO of the firm, Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.1.0.0.004) attributed the adoption of multiple media format as a way to reach a wider set of audience and extend the exposure of their intellectual property (IP) as commercial content. Among his team, Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.1.0.0.005), who hold editor position in the firm, also agree with the notion on extending exposure but place more emphasis on servicing the fan of *Ejen Ali* franchise. By having multiple outlets for consumption, fans of *Ejen Ali* can engage with the content in various ways.

Non managerial personnel also shared similar perspectives and understand the business logic behind the adoption of multiple media platforms indicating that venturing for this practice is a common and logical approach by an animation company. Ms. Dania (excerpt 7.1.0.007), a production coordinator at Wau Animation, recognized the adoption of multiple mediums for *Ejen Ali* franchise as a marketing strategy and an outlet for income generation for *Ejen Ali* as an intellectual property. She also highlighted that exposure from various platforms can provide opportunities for the promotion of local culture and value geared for national tourism campaigns. This is particularly interesting

because it reflects previous discussions in chapter 2 (section 2.2) that it has been the public aspiration for local production house to assume the role of cultivating Malaysian culture and value through animation. It seems that Wau Animation understand and internalize this role within their production pipeline.

Continuing the discussion on the business aspect of the adopting multiple media platform, Mr. Faiz Salim (excerpt 7.1.0.008), a storyboard artist, explains that having extra product that exist beyond major screens like broadcasting television and cinema provide further avenue of generating revenue for a single IP. Additionally, Mr. Faiz Salim also shared that premiering on major screens, especially in the cinema industry, often comes with numerous significant costs which are not well-known to the public. Payment for governmental taxes, charges from the cinema house, and revenue-sharing with their partner (Media Prima Berhad) are some of the underlying costs that necessitates Wau Animation to venture into different ways they can generate extra income for *Ejen Ali.* When compared to the current theoretical grounds as outlined in chapter 3, it would seem that Wau Animation as a commercial production company understand quite well the advantages of adopting multiple media format to expand *Ejen Ali* franchise. Their articulation on the topic has similarities with several scholars' perspective on content production company operated with media convergence philosophy.

Wau Animation's perspective on the adoption of multiple media platforms is consistent with scholars' theory (as outlined in section 3.1) on the inclination among media producers to repurpose or rework an existing material in various media format. The motivation for *Ejen Ali* franchise to survive and thrive in content market through multiple media platforms as business model mentioned by respondents such as Mr. Adam (excerpt 7.1.0.002), Mr. Haikal (excerpt 7.1.0.006), Ms. Dania (excerpt 7.1.0.007), and Mr. Faiz (excerpt 7.1.0.008) aligned with the theoretical comprehension over this topic. For example, Kim and Hong (2013) states that repurposed work tends to enjoy greater success

in the market due to its existing audience base—those who consumed the original version. Moreover, this model offers advantages in promoting new iterations, as marketing efforts to raise awareness are already partly covered by the previous versions of the content (ibid).

Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.1.0.001) and Mr. Adam (excerpt 7.1.0.002) have mentioned previously that western practice particularly by the Disney company that engage with the adoption of multiple media platforms somewhat inspires Wau Animation to experiment with the practice. Their observations on Disney's strategy is consistent with another research. Chung and Ju (2016) assert that Disney utilizes production model to strategically enhance their control over various intellectual properties by repurposing and transforming existing content into different forms of popular media, while minimizing expenditures on licensing and royalties. Through this, Disney strategically acquires multiple popular franchises such as Marvel Entertainment and Lucasfilm to bolster their economic dominance within the cultural industry.

This production model posits that media corporations are incentivized to repurpose existing content across various popular media as a cost-effective and efficient means of expanding their product lines. The resale of established properties is deemed an essential economic strategy (Klinger, 2006). Ndalianis (2004) supports this principle, describing the strategic repurposing phenomenon among media conglomerates as a marketing strategy aimed at maximizing the marketing potential of products (also aligned with Mr. Haikal and Ms Dania). Additionally, she suggests that corporations owning subsidiary companies specializing in serializing story franchises stand to gain further economic benefits, as the potential profits across multiple investments are significantly extended (Ndalianis, 2004). Alignment between observational understandings by Wau Animation team and scholarly articulation suggests that Wau Animation as a production

house possess substantial and working knowledge driven by proper motivation to pursue the adoption of multiple media platforms to expand *Ejen Ali* franchise.

As I have demonstrated that Wau Animation has practical comprehension over the reasoning behind the adoption of multiple media format, I want to highlight that their commitment, or at least, their understanding over the practice is not limited to its business aspect. Findings in chapter 6 of this thesis have illustrated that the availability of *Ejen Ali*'s content in multiple media format is not merely to expand the franchise. Rather, various works of *Ejen Ali* are utilized to broaden the narrative as well as enrich the storyworld for the benefit of the audience. As I have argued in section 3.2, producers are incentivized to put in efforts toward developing the aesthetic dimension of their multi-platformed works in order to garner favorable reception in the content market. Henry Jenkins (2006) support this as he states that the concept of transmedia storytelling aptly captures the contemporary production paradigm, wherein narratives are spread across multiple platforms to build a cohesive story universe. Jenkins (2006) articulates how the fluidity of content across mediums profoundly shapes storytelling in popular culture. He introduces the term "transmedia storytelling" to denote a content creation approach wherein narratives are dispersed across various media formats, each instalment standing alone while contributing to the overarching story arc (Jenkins, 2004, 2006).

Through the logic of transmedia storytelling, a content franchise does not only consist of multitude of creative works involving various media format. It also entails profound connection between various works within the franchise, especially in terms of narrative. While Jenkins (2006) keen on positing that each work within a transmedia franchise should contribute to an overarching narrative that cover the whole franchise, other scholars like Ryan (2017), Wolf (2014), and Freeman (2017) agree that worldbuilding serve as an important tool to enhance connection between various work within the franchise. Analysis on the conversations that I had with several Wau Animation

personnels reveals that Wau Animation might have been aware on the importance of paying attention to the narrative aesthetics of their works alongside of having these works developed in various media format.

I argue that this awareness showcases their unique approach in venturing into transmedia storytelling. This is because I believe that the way Wau Animation develops their transmedia strategy is through observation, experimentation, and experience rather than adherence to the theoretical construct made ready in the scholarly field. Majority conversations that I have with Wau Animation, even with their top management, core conceptual terminologies revolving transmedia storytelling (such as additive comprehension, migratory cues, negative capability, and worldbuilding) as I have written in the literature review (chapter 3) are close to non-existence. However, various descriptions and articulation made by respondent justifying why they did certain thing that resemble these conceptual terminologies often mentioned during the interviews. This claim will be explained further in the next section as it delves further into the production process of developing transmedia products. Still, an example of this can be shown from a conversation with the CEO, Mr. Usamah.

> I treat this story (referring to *Ejen Ali*) as a form of art. Perhaps, I see it as a painting. In this world, there are many colors and there are many mediums. But the painter has to choose which medium, which colors are suitable for its palette. So, even though the story of *Ejen Ali* is filled with many kinds of emotions and characters, it is quite limiting fit all of it into 90 minutes film. There, we have to boil down what's essential for this movie. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.1.0.009**)

Mr Usamah's comment (excerpt 7.1.0.009) resemble a real life and practical implementation that reflect Martin Freeman (2017, pp. 32,33) notion of "authorship" in transmedia practice which describe the role of an author to "dictate characters and entire

fictional story world, building both of these aspect across multiple media". Additionally, if I may refer back to excerpt 7.1.0.002, Mr. Usamah stated that having multiple media formats enables Wau Animation to capture a community among consumer that pays attention to *Ejen Ali* franchise. Mr. Usamah articulation resembles Jenkins (2006) assertion on the formation of knowledge community towards shared interest in popular culture. This knowledge community will drive activities, attentions, and discussion among themselves which will be beneficial to the franchise.

While I find it amazing that Wau Animation as a production company possess practical understanding mimicking the scholarly knowledge on transmedia storytelling concept, I believe that it is not the core purpose of this thesis to see primarily on the similarities between practical implementation and theoretical construct. With that said, I want to highlight how Wau Animation is different and unique as a transmedia production firm. Furthermore, I intend to showcase how this uniqueness can contribute to current theoretical knowledge on the concept of transmedia storytelling as well as its worldbuilding aspect. Upon analyzing interviews with Wau Animation team members, I have found that being different and unique can be a recurring thought among Wau Animation team members as they believe that uniqueness is a desirable trait for a storyteller, especially for a commercial one. Being unique can enhance the value proposition of their work as often time audience seeks new things from the content market to consume. Striving to be unique drive Wau Animation to innovate and to create more creative works for *Ejen Ali* franchise.

The adoption of multiple media platforms in *Ejen Ali* franchise is perceived to be natural and logical business pathway among the Wau Animation staff members and this view reverberates among those from the top management and those in the production floor. Their awareness, evidently, comes from observation of the current entertainment in both domestic and international markets. However, upon inquiring more on this

understanding, I notice that while the adoption of multiple mediums indicates Wau Animation's adherence to global trend, Wau Animation is motivated to be different in the way this model is adopted.

> I mean, truthfully, we are primarily an animation studio, not a comic studio. If we look at Japan, for example, they are primarily a comic-first culture, then later, they adapt to animation. But in Malaysia, if we look at local IPs, there aren't many based on comics. Mostly, they start with original stories, then later, they release comics or, if we look at Monsta, like *Boboiboy Galaxy*, they first released comics and then formulated differently, somewhat following the Japanese style or what is deemed appropriate. Even in the West, nowadays, they mostly use references from their various comics, which have different original stories. So they choose the best version to adapt into animation or live action. So, for us in the local scene, it's not as big yet. We started mostly as an animation studio before comics or other things. Our priority was animation first. (Kamarul, KA20230605/ **excerpt 7.1.0.010)**

Mr. Kamarul is among the earliest personnel to join Wau Animation. While he primarily works on illustrating ideas as storyboard, he also tasked to develop trading card game as part of *Ejen Ali* franchise. Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.1.0.010) points out that *Ejen Ali*'s primary and originating storytelling component is presented in animation form (film and TV series), rather than comic book which is a common originating and source material for multi-platformed content franchise in Japan and Hollywood. Having to prioritize animation as core component of *Ejen Ali* franchise highlights Wau Animation's uniqueness in formulating their multi-platform strategy.

Mr. Kamarul's thought (excerpt 7.1.0.010) is consistent with the findings in section 6.1 as I mentioned that the TV series and film instalment (both are animation works) serve as primary extension of *Ejen Ali* franchise as they contain most of the main storyline for this franchise. Additionally, there is also one respondent that appreciates the franchise in through its aesthetic appeal in conjunction with the concept of transmedia storytelling.

> Even before *Ejen Ali* and working in the animation industry I was very interested with this franchise. I admired the quality of animation and the thematic approach, something different that we hadn't seen before. Usamah's worldbuilding, the spy gadgets, and incorporating local elements, all these things made us excited as viewers. (Dania, DM20230330/ **excerpt 7.1.0.011**)

Ms. Dania's thought (excerpt 7.0.0.11) points out that the aesthetic value of *Ejen Ali* franchise is something that should not be taken lightly as it entails the reason why this franchise is unique, new, and importantly popular. Notes that, Ms. Dania mentioned 'worldbuilding' suggesting that she might be aware on the concept of storyworld. Nonetheless, this section attempts to illustrate the commitment of Wau Animation to adopt a practice that is consistent with the concept of transmedia storytelling. Although, it is not clear whether Wau Animation intentionally adopts transmedia storytelling paradigm into their production format, it is evident that Wau Animation understands its logic and is motivated to be successful through this method.

Ms. Dania comment (excerpt 7.0.0.11) can be a perfect transitionary note to the next section which delves into why Wau Animation transmedia production format is unique and different. The next chapter will visit the idea that the establishment of *Ejen Ali* storyworld as it is depicted across multiple works involving various format through worldbuilding is experimental instead of structured from the beginning. However,

although it is experimental, the result in the market is undoubtedly impressive with numerous achievements and awards. Therefore, next section will showcase Wau Animation perspective on the matter and illustrate the way they approach worldbuilding as an experiment.

7.2   Exploratory worldbuilding

Scholarly discourse and reviews on transmedia storytelling often entail discussions of industrial movements among media conglomerates and the examination of a variety of globally recognized works. Notably, Henry Jenkins frequently utilizes popular franchises such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *The Matrix* to explain his theoretical understanding of convergence logic, participatory culture, and transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2003, 2006). Additionally, Freeman (2017), while disagreeing with Jenkins regarding transmedia storytelling as a byproduct of contemporary industrial settings, endeavors to historicize this concept through the analysis of existing popular works such as *Land of Oz*, *Tarzan*, and *Superman*. Prominent scholars like Jenkins and Freeman approach this theory predominantly through the lens of popular works, prompting numerous other researchers to follow suit with transmedia storytelling analyses focusing on franchises such as the MCU or *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Menard, 2015; Proctor, 2014; Richter, 2016), the *Transformer* franchise (Fast, 2012), and the *Harry Potter* franchise (Brindley, 2019; Brummitt, 2016; Maschler, 2023).

The emphasis on popular works as a form of transmedia storytelling is corroborated by Ryan (2017), who largely concurs with the transmedia logic posited by Jenkins (2007). This logic asserts that the dispersal of a grand narrative into multiple works across different media platforms should be systematically executed to provide consumers with a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ryan (2017) further argues that this process necessitates a top-down approach, commencing with a broader picture or grand narrative and strategically disseminating it into multiple works. Such top-

down planning enables the coordination of multiple interconnected texts, aiding audiences in comprehending the grand narrative and its storyworld. However, Ryan (2017) also notes that contemporary transmedia narratives often stem from existing popular brands of content, with new instalments developed as narrative extensions or additions to the storyworld. This practice diverges from the notion of initial top-down planning which entails new and fresh work to be formulated as transmedia content, as many so-called transmedia narratives emerge from existing popular brands such as the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, *Harry Potter*, and *Star Wars* (Ryan, 2017). Arguably, this aligns with the prevalent ideology of maximizing the profitability of intellectual properties, particularly within popular culture, which serves as a significant production paradigm among media conglomerates. It appears that Disney's one-source multi-use (OSMU) model, as explained in Chapter 3, remains influential despite the rapid adoption of the transmedia storytelling approach in the media industry.

In the case of Wau Animation and their work, the *Ejen Ali* franchise, the approach to transmedia storytelling differs from the predictions or descriptions outlined by Jenkins (2006) and Ryan (2017). As discussed in Chapter 6, transmedia storytelling features are evident in the *Ejen Ali* franchise concerning both narrative progression and the development of the storyworld. Considering the narrative progression across multiple instalments in various formats and the consistent portrayal of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld across several works, this thesis posits the *Ejen Ali* franchise as a case of transmedia narrative in Malaysia. However, upon inquiry into the process and approach to producing the *Ejen Ali* franchise as a multi-platformed work, I found that Wau Animation formulates their own version of transmedia storytelling, considering the availability of limited resources and exploitable industrial opportunities.

As demonstrated in Section 7.1, Wau Animation recognizes the advantages of adopting multiple media platforms to expand the *Ejen Ali* franchise while also paying attention to the aesthetic structure of both the narrative and the storyworld of *Ejen Ali*. The concept of having *Ejen Ali's* content across several media formats was introduced early in the development process, even before the release of their first major work, the *Ejen Ali* animated series. This suggests that the decision to establish *Ejen Ali* as a multi-platformed franchise was a planned move, consistent with Ryan's (2017) perspective. However, the approach described by respondents in progressively developing several instalments as the franchise grow does not indicate the establishment of a grand narrative from the outset. Crafting *Ejen Ali's* narrative and developing its storyworld appears to occur on an instalment-by-instalment basis, rather than through the development of a grand narrative strategically disseminated across various interconnected works. Nonetheless, their various instalments remain consistent and cohesive with one another, as outlined in Chapter 6.

To illustrate Wau Animation's transmedia storytelling approach, it is imperative to differentiate between intention and implementation regarding the expansion of the *Ejen Ali* franchise. By distinguishing between intention and implementation, a comparison can effectively be drawn between Wau Animation's transmedia approach and the theoretical constructs outlined in this thesis. The intention to feature *Ejen Ali* content across platforms was conceived among the production team early in the franchise's operation. However, the implementation of this intention was not initially planned. Instead, the development of new works for *Ejen Ali* relied on the performance of previous works in the market and the availability of resources. As will showcase further in Section 7.2.2 (reactive of opportunity and feedback), both Wau Animation and Media Prima Berhad are eager to develop *Ejen Ali* into a film format as well as a TV series. However, Media Prima, as the co-producer of *Ejen Ali*, insists on developing it as a TV series initially.

Based on the reception of this TV series among consumers, a decision regarding cinematic format will be made.

It is also pertinent to distinguish between business-driven decisions and the creative process employed by Wau Animation in the development of *Ejen Ali* content across various media formats. The adoption of multiple media formats for the *Ejen Ali* franchise as a business move was decided early in the franchise's development process, as both Wau Animation and Media Prima shared an interest in developing *Ejen Ali* as a film, TV series, and mobile game, as stated by Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.0.005). However, the creative process behind each instalment, such as crafting the narrative, formulating connections with other instalments, and developing the *Ejen Ali* storyworld, occurred on an instalment-by-instalment basis.

> … to say that we planned everything from the beginning, isn't entirely accurate. But I believe having different media makes it easier to expand because we already have the intellectual property (IP). For example, entering the gaming industry allows us to craft stories for games. If there's a magazine, we can incorporate that too. However, there was a general idea from the beginning. Like if we want to make a game or a comic, we already have some ideas in mind. For example, in the third season, during the Movement Control Order (MCO), we released a game called *Ejen Ali Arena*. But the concept for season 3 was based on the concept of the Arena from the game. The story followed suit. **(Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ excerpt 7.2.0.001)**

Mr. Fuad, one of the directors responsible for the brand and promotion of *Ejen Ali*, among other responsibilities, sheds light on the creation of *Ejen Ali* content beyond the animation form. According to him (excerpt 7.2.0.001), the incorporation of various media formats for the *Ejen Ali* franchise has been a concept accepted at Wau Animation

since the franchise's inception. This acceptance stems from the digital nature of *Ejen Ali* as an intangible intellectual property that is flexible across media platforms. As long as it is viable, the production team, primarily the company's leadership, is prepared to extend *Ejen Ali's* narrative and expand its storyworld to suit the adopted media format.

Despite animation serving as the primary product of Wau Animation, it does not always serve as the originating material for other works. As mentioned by Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.0.001), the 'Battle Arena' element introduced in season 3 (premiered in 2022) is inspired by the battle arena concept established in *Ejen Ali: Agent Arena* mobile game which is released a year before. This shows that *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia franchise is not built through a top-down paradigm wherein a grand narrative is established first before dissembling it into multiple works. Instead, it shows that Wau Animation consistently finds opportunities to grow the *Ejen Ali* franchise, given that narrative and worldbuilding elements that have been established can be reused in different contexts.

The business aspect in the development of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia franchise remains crucial for Wau Animation, especially when contemplating expansion directions. In evaluating the potential of developing *Ejen Ali* content for both television and cinema, Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.0.002) explained the importance of assessing the business viability and associated risks of each platform. He elucidated that while television series offer extended visibility, the Malaysian market, in comparison to Hollywood exemplars like *The Simpsons*, does not currently offer substantial per-episode payouts. Achieving worthwhile revenue from television series necessitates considerable time due to relatively low payments in Malaysia. Conversely, producing a film for *Ejen Ali* presents potentially higher returns, particularly if the film becomes a major success upon release. However, the inherent risk in filmmaking is significantly greater, with instances where local productions fail to recoup their investment costs, yielding meager box office returns in contrast to the substantial production expenses.

I wouldn't say that one is better than the other; it depends on what we want to do; each has its strengths and weaknesses. I would say, for TV, we could say its visibility is longer. Its visibility is longer, but in terms of commercials, in terms of business, it takes longer to recoup the investment because TV payments aren't high in Malaysia. Maybe abroad, if we hear about shows like *The Simpsons*, they make how many million per episode. If that's the case, it might be very worthwhile. But in Malaysia, I think we have yet to reach that level and still need to grow the market reach and the business in order to profit. But with movies, there's a clause; if it explodes, because movies have a high investment, you have to spend at least, in these days and age, around 5 million, even if it's a rough estimate. If we want to make a game, it's about 4 million. But if the movie doesn't hit, you can go as low as less than a hundred thousand. So, you lose big; it's a high-risk but high-impact situation. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.0.002**)

During its early years of operation, Wau Animation tended to adopt the safest approach when producing content for *Ejen Ali*. Their decision to prioritize the development of a television series before a film was heavily influenced by business considerations rather than aesthetic pursuits. According to Mr. Usamah's perspective (excerpt 7.2.0.003), venturing into television series during their formative years was a strategic move to minimize risk. He stated that in the worst-case scenario, if *Ejen Ali* fails to gain traction, Wau Animation could pivot into a licensing company focused solely on maintaining the *Ejen Ali* television series as intellectual property. As he mentioned previously (in excerpt 7.2.0.002), *Ejen Ali* as a television series offers prolonged visibility, or shelf life, as broadcasting rights can be resold.

Then, for series, you say, worst-case scenario, if you've made the series but haven't recouped your investment and can't sustain it, you can shut down the production. You can shut down production and just leave your company as a company that will sell. So when you sell to TV, let's say you sign for two years, four years, when that contract term ends, you can resell it. Like now we see with Friends. Friends is still being sold and still on TV. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.0.003**)

Mr. Faiz Hanafiah, the director primarily responsible for the production pipeline, echoes Mr. Usamah's sentiments regarding the utility and shelf life of television series. He added (excerpt 7.2.0.004) that while concerns exist regarding television station payouts for series producers, other digital and online avenues offer opportunities to generate additional revenue.

The beauty of intellectual property is that it can actually be sold, it's really playing a game of numbers too. How many platforms are there now? Netflix, for example, has many platforms. Social media, too. TV isn't as much anymore, compared to before. The price TV pays for a show to air isn't as high as it used to be, not as high as it was ten years ago; there's been a change now. (Faiz Hanafiah, FH20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.0.004**)

While the directors have concerns about the cost and risk aspects of expanding *Ejen Ali* into various media formats, Wau Animation remains open to venturing into other media forms besides its core animation format, especially if there are viable opportunities.

In the process of expanding the *Ejen Ali* franchise, the production team naturally innovate new narrative material suitable for the new works' media forms. For example, printed media (such as comic magazines and trading cards) would require static artwork, whereas digital platforms (films, TV series, and mobile games) can showcase animated content. The connectivity and cohesiveness between films, TV series, comic books, and

mobile games, outlined in chapter 6, may indicate coordination in developing multiple content across platforms. However, upon inquiring with the production team, it seems that the coordination in terms of the content itself was not initiated at the beginning of this franchise's development. In other words, there is no indication that Wau Animation strategized a grand scheme of worldbuilding for the *Ejen Ali* franchise from the start. Rather than a top-down approach, Wau Animation explores various worldbuilding possibilities for each new instalment while ensuring that each new work remains cohesive and consistent with the rest.

Ultimately, venturing into different media platforms for *Ejen Ali* represents Wau Animation's commitment to exploring opportunities for business growth and experimenting with different ways they can utilize *Ejen Ali* as an intellectual property. On the other hand, while the worldbuilding aspect of *Ejen Ali* is coordinated, as shown by its cohesiveness across various media platforms, Wau Animation's approach to worldbuilding is also exploratory in nature rather than organized from the beginning.

> The intention to develop the game was mainly because of Media Prima as they have digital media wings, Prima labs. They wanted to build their portfolio on that side. So even though they saw that in Malaysia, in terms of monetization for local games, it wasn't much, but they still did it and tried to find sponsors to get involved. But to answer your question about the game, I think the main reason was for it to be used as marketing, but it was also an experiment on how to do monetization. When it came to Agent Arena, it was an experiment on how to make a multiplayer game. They had tried hosting esports tournaments before. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.0.005**)

But I would say that 80 percent of the effort for that season was carried out by Media Prima Digital's side. We came in as the people who managed the IP, meaning we looked after the idea and saw if it was in line with what the IP was doing. As for comics, when we first started, we began with comic magazines because using the assets or products we had produced in animation, we wanted to branch out to more merchandise and see how we could expand the business, meaning get a different set of revenue streams.

(Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.0.005,** continued)

Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.0.005) stated that the development of mobile games was an exploratory move by both Wau Animation and Media Prima to experiment with *Ejen Ali* as an IP to generate income through sponsorship and game monetization. This was made possible by Media Prima's capacity as a conglomerate in Malaysia, which has a digital wing that could undertake the task of developing the games, freeing Wau Animation from incurring additional costs for a new *Ejen Ali* instalment. As an added value, the new instalment can also act as marketing material for added brand exposure in the media market. Regarding the worldbuilding aspect, the development of the storyworld for *Ejen Ali* is also exploratory. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.0.005) pointed out that the concept of Agent Arena was conceived as an experiment to implement a multi-player feature for the mobile game which is released in 2021. The same concept (Agent Arena) was later adopted in the storyline for season 3 of the TV series which aired the next year, 2022. This serves as an example to showcase that worldbuilding is not done from the offset. Rather, the worldbuilding aspect is developed through experimentation which exploratory is nature.

I think not necessarily narrative or business. I think in the beginning, they

wanted to put a game out there because I think it was probably suggested

by Media Prima. And they were like, oh, we have an opportunity to do

this. Let's do it. That same thing actually happened recently with there was

this 3D billboard in the pavilion, and Disney asked us, hey, we got an

empty slot. Would you like it? And we were like, yeah, let's do it. Because

we have never had a 3D billboard before. And now we're using 3D

billboards all the time. (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.2.0.006**)

This exploratory approach has shaped Wau Animation to be very flexible in worldbuilding and vigilant towards opportunities that could further their business. Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.0.006) stated that new opportunities to expand *Ejen Ali*'s content in various media formats often come through their relationship with Media Prima. As these opportunities arise, Wau Animation is motivated to pursue developing material suitable for the new works that need to be done.

Yes, movies like that because, yeah, that's the advantage and disadvantage

of a movie, a ninety-minute duration, but the world story, you know. It's

like a big meal. So if we change the beginning, we have to change the

back. Right? If it's a series, the series is like, in the next episode, we

explore. In the next episode, we explore. But in a movie, oh, we've

changed the front here. So we have to do it a bit. There are some who have

done a scene in the middle, oh, it doesn't fit here because the duration is

not enough, so we have to cut something (Faiz, FS20230624/ **excerpt

7.2.0.007**)

In terms of content development, the exploratory approach remains preferred by the production team. Mr. Faiz (excerpt 7.2.0.007) mentions that Wau Animation is always flexible in developing narratives for TV series. The narrative direction can change as they explore different narrative pathways for *Ejen Ali*. Although, this would be much harder for films, as this media format is restricted to a 90-minute screen time, much less than TV series, which have more screen time depending on the number of episodes. Mr. Faiz (excerpt 7.2.0.008), a storyboard artist, also added that the exploratory paradigm is adopted into the main workflow in the storyboarding department. Finding inspiration from other work globally and learning from them help shaped the way *Ejen Ali* is represented, especially in the animation format.

> Actually, the storyboard needs to be explored on its own. Usually, we would search on YouTube, like for Sakuga. In Japan, they call it Sakuga. It's shots that are expensive to produce, like Sakuga, fighting scenes. We searched for "Sakuga fighting Scene," and there are compilations of beautiful fighting shots from various anime. We watch those to get ideas, whether it is sword fighting or other types. We won't copy exactly, but at least the idea is there. It's like, "Oh, someone did it like this; let's adjust the camera a bit." (Faiz, FS20230624/ **excerpt 7.2.0.008**)

This exploratory approach enables Wau Animation to be flexible in their storytelling, which can be seen as a strength by members of the production team. However, ensuring that all components of *Ejen Ali* franchise is cohesive is also important. Seeing that *Ejen Ali* is a multi-platformed franchise consisting of interconnected works (as illustrated in chapter 6), the exploratory approach seems fruitful for Wau Animation. Resulting from the interview session with the production team, I found that the exploratory approach is achieved through three distinct formulas: a bottom-up production

strategy, reactivity to feedback and opportunities, and striving for continuity. Each of these formulations will be discussed further in the following subsections.

7.2.1 Bottom-up strategy

One of the key strategies for exploratory worldbuilding implemented by Wau Animation is a bottom-up approach. The bottom-up production format represents a paradigm in the worldbuilding process in which the storyworld for a transmedia narrative is developed further as new work is added into the franchise. Therefore, progress in worldbuilding through the bottom-up approach relies upon the rate of additional components being added into the franchise. This would be the opposite of the top-down approach suggested by Ryan (2017). Nevertheless, the byproduct of the bottom-up approach adopted by Wau Animation still meets the theoretical proposition of transmedia storytelling as suggested in this thesis. Based on interviews with several team members of the production, Wau Animation consciously utilizes the bottom-up approach to develop their content.

While respondents, primarily comprising Wau Animation personnel, may not explicitly articulate their utilization of the bottom-up approach in shaping the storyworld for *Ejen Ali*, subtle indications of its application emerge during their descriptions of the developmental processes within the *Ejen Ali* franchise. Notably, the production team engages in various forms of new writing processes during the development of varying instalments, reflecting a dynamic approach to determining the content structure of each release. This would indicate that they do not have a clear and complete description of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld (built at the start) that they may use to embed into new instalments. Rather, they engage in conversations and brainstorming upon developing new instalments, figuring out how the narrative will progress and how the storyworld should unfold.

The dynamic between narrative progression and development of the storyworld for *Ejen Ali* influenced the way each instalment, especially those with major plots, is produced. This is because Wau Animation understands that as the franchise grows, its storyworld also needs to follow suit, which would carry and host more narratives to be portrayed. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.001) stated that the journey to write the story and plot always relies on the way the storyworld unfolds or is portrayed as a creative asset, and vice versa. Sometimes elements of the storyworld must be changed, and with these changes, the written stories need to be revisited. Similarly, sometimes a written plot does not work, and a new narrative pathway needs to be written. With the change in the narrative pathway, new worldbuilding elements will be created to accommodate the new narrative.

> It's like it's back and forth (between writing the narrative and developing the storyworld) … for example, when considering the story, we have a direction on where we want to go. However, when the design comes out, we ask again how else we can improve this design, and then suddenly it sparks an idea that circles back to the story… let's start at the beginning, okay, we have the character Ali, where does he live, what's his school like, how is it? As the world starts growing, it fuels the story back, and then it inspires some new ideas that in turn will circle back to add ideas to the world building. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.1.001**)

As they build numerous productions and publications, Wau Animation also embeds intertwining elements that correlate between one instalment and another. A top-down approach would be an effective strategy to coordinate this practice as predicted by Ryan (2017). However, for Wau Animation, the embedding of intertwining elements is not entirely planned. When asked about whether intertwining plots involving multiple

works are intentional or not, Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.1.002) answered that it is a combination of planning and spontaneous moves.

> I think it's a little bit of both (referring to whether the intertwining stories are intentional or a spur of the moment). When the characters, especially the side characters, when we came up with them back in 2016, 2017. ... 'hey, let's try to represent different people as much as we can'. And it's definitely not a random thing. So, it's a little bit of both. It's a bit of a little bit of planning, and there's a little bit of a spur of the moment. (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.2.1.002**)

Unplanned moves from the start of the franchise are consistent with the bottom-up approach, treating each new work as a fresh project instead of relying on preordained narrative conditions. This is perhaps because Wau Animation is trying to find the best way to develop the *Ejen Ali* franchise, which requires them to test new strategies and find the best approach. The bottom-up strategy is an opportunity for Wau Animation to learn through experimentation. Therefore, failure is a blessing, and there is always a silver lining as long as they are willing to see the positive side of things.

An example that Wau Animation is learning is shown with Mr. Fuad's remarks (excerpt 7.2.1.003) about finding *Ejen Ali's* core themes, which may act as its identity as an animated content. Even as early as determining core themes for its animation, Wau Animation is trying to learn by observing other works instead of having it established by only looking inwards. The fact that they also seek counsel from other industry players suggests that Wau Animation is keen on finding the best pathway for their work.

So, one of the things we thought about was the theme – smart, stylish, and silly. Smart, meaning the storytelling needs to be clever, stylish for that cool factor, and silly, incorporating a bit of humor or fun…. We have conversations both internally and externally (with some of the industry players) about animation and its characteristics. We learned during those conversations that animation tends to have core themes (or sometimes multiple themes) adopted for its narrative. From there, it becomes apparent for us to decide on our theme, besides creating the story, that guides the development of various works for *Ejen Ali*. Our merchandise or games will be based on that particular theme. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 7.2.1.003**)

From the perspective of a storyboard artist, Mr. Kamarul can attest to the nature of learning and experimenting in Wau Animation's production pipeline. Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.1.004) stated that the storyboard is an integral element for production as it provides the first visualization of the written narrative. Mr. Kamarul also added that when those first visualizations are materialized into animation works, sometimes there are elements that contradict or things that haven't been included, which need to be fixed. This requires the pre-production team and the production team to be vigilant in detecting errors. Still, mistakes can happen, and whenever they do, the production team members will try to remain positive, learn from it, and move forward by improvising their work in the future.

So, whatever has been set up or established, if later in the middle or towards the end, something doesn't tally or suddenly appears, as in you never set up or foreshadowed it… we try to detect those things, but, of course, we are just human, sometimes we overlooked it ... But that's how it is. And sometimes, what we want to do and the execution, it doesn't reach people correctly. That also happens. Also, the timing, sometimes we try so hard, but the pacing isn't enough for the audience to grab the moment or the feeling, but it continues. So sometimes, those are regrets. It's something we are constantly learning, trying to improvise in the future.

(Kamarul, KA20230605/ **excerpt 7.2.1.004**)

This learning process and experimentation enable the production to continuously improve their work. This learning process is made possible with the bottom-up approach, where new works are done without prior narrative conditions, and the production team is allowed to explore various possibilities. The bottom-up approach can also be seen through the respondents' commentary and remarks on the production of multiple instalments involving various media formats. In the case of the *Ejen Ali* franchise, the encompassing works are TV series, films, comic magazines, mobile games, and other minor additions like vlogs, trading card games, and merchandise.

7.2.1.1 TV series and film

TV series and film are two distinct media formats. Mr. Farhan (excerpt 7.2.1.005) explained that there are differences in dealing with production in these two media platforms. For cinematic film format, the limited duration makes it challenging for the production team to compress large information into one instalment. However, for TV series, it could pose different challenges especially to develop progressing narrative from one episode to another as well as coordinating connections among the episodes. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.006) supports this as he stated that attention to characters in the

narratives is one of the differences between TV series and film. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.006) said that in the film they have to crammed as much information as they can about characters' information as the duration of the film is very short. Unlike TV series that have more hours in it, Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.1.007) stated that TV series enable the production team to spend more time with characters, particularly side characters that have not been paid attention to in the film.

> We have thirteen episodes. Twenty minutes multiplied by thirteen episodes, which gives us a lot of time. We can tell a longer story. But for a movie, we only have ninety minutes. And how do we compact the story as densely as possible, as concise as possible, as great and as best as possible in ninety minutes? So, for me, the treatment for movies is harder. But it's more complicated when it comes to making a series because it's too long… how do we break it down according to the story for each episode? Sometimes, it's like that too. And yes, sometimes the other thing that is difficult is unraveling the connection between each story, each character. (Farhan, AF20230408/ **excerpt 7.2.1.005**)

> It's not actually enough if we want to give attention to all the characters. So, we have to really focus, really concentrate on what we need to tell to settle within that 90-minute time frame. So, it was like we had to be very selective, you know, various things. I think from season one, even season two had those elements, but from series to movie, it was very eye-opening for us, you know, the difference in the medium. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.1.006**)

Okay, well, with TV, you get a little bit more time, essentially, because with each episode, you got about 20 minutes, and in each season, you have about 13 episodes. So that's a lot of time that you get to spend with extra time that you get to spend with these characters, especially side characters like the young agents in the academy, that we didn't really get much time to feature them in the movie because the movie was Ali's story. So with the TV series, there are a larger vocabulary of characters that the audience can relate to, like, oh, hey, I'm like Iman, oh, hey, I'm like Jet. They have-there's more room to play with during a TV series show (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.2.1.007**)

Despite distinct media formats, both television series and film serve as prominent platforms for showcasing animation, which constitutes the core product of Wau Animation as an animation firm. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.006) highlighted Wau Animation's deliberate intent to cultivate *Ejen Ali* as both a television series and a film. However, the development of content, encompassing narrative and storyworld, for these platforms did not implement with preconceived plans. Following Media Prima's partnership, the media conglomerate insisted on initially producing two seasons of the television series and evaluating their performance in the media market. The decision to proceed with the film's development was contingent upon the success of the television series. Media Prima's primary focus at the time centers on cultivating a fan base for the franchise before committing substantial resources to film production.

At the early stage, particularly when they (Media Prima) wanted to come in, they agreed that the production would commence for two seasons first. This is because they felt that if it's just one season, it's too early to tell whether the product can be successful or not. Media Prima indicates that if it's already past two seasons and still hasn't gained traction, then forget the movie. If that season wasn't successful enough and there's no fan base, there's no need to make the movie. It would be a waste. But thankfully, after the first three episodes aired, the ratings were already like over two million viewership. So right after the three episodes, they were like, okay, we can make the movie, even though it just aired on TV. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.1.008**)

Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.008) mentioned that instead of waiting for two seasons, the decision to develop the film is obtained after airing three episodes to local broadcasting television. Having two million viewership for the three episodes deemed to be successful enough to justify the costly production of the film.

Interestingly, the narrative for the film is not pre-written yet. This is because during the early years of their operation, Wau Animation was still finding its tune in the production of animated content. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.009) admitted that the plots for either the TV series or film are not mapped out from the beginning. Still, they have a form of direction on which way to go in terms of the narrative, or at least some ideas on how it should end. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.009) emphasized that the consideration on narrative development and its complementary storyworld, for TV series and film are dependent upon one and another. This is due to Wau Animation intention to make these two platforms in continuance from one another and bridging both stories need careful thought process. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.009) exemplified his thought on this by

mentioning the portrayal of 'Satria' suit at the end of the *Ejen Ali: The Movie* film as a teaser for future plot in either TV series or film.

> If we take into consideration stories from season 1, admittedly, we don't have all plots clearly mapped out from the beginning. But I believe that telling a story requires the storyteller to know where the story is heading which motivates me to at least have a form of ideas on where the plot should end. But, when it comes to the plot growth, various elements need to be considered as the production of the story progresses. Especially when it comes to bridging stories between different media formats. For example, while we know how the movie should end, we also have considered including an element at the end of the movie, which is the "Satria" suits that serves as teaser for future story plot. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.1.009**)

Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.010) iterates that they have to adopt the mindset of having to develop the film from a fresh perspective to accommodate audience that may not see the TV series yet. Having made the film from a fresh perspective also serves as evidence that a bottom-up approach is adopted. *Ejen Ali* storyworld was expanded through the film instalment as the instalment is developed.

> … by the time we got close to developing the movie, it seemed like we had to have a mindset as if most of the audience didn't know anything about what had happened in the first two seasons. So we have to write with a fresh mindset. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.1.010**)

Instead of having to outline every plot and plan the number of instalments at start, Wau Animation develops *Ejen Ali* storyworld as the franchise grows. Season 3 of the TV series also went through a similar paradigm. The production of season 3 is the result of a different partnership. Through Media Prima, Disney approached Wau Animation for new local content for their Disney+ platform in Malaysia. With this approach, Wau Animation was given the opportunity to develop another season of the TV series after their film's success in 2019. The writing process for season 3 seems to obey, yet again, the bottom-up approach. Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.1.011) said that the 'Battle Arena' concept portrayed in the mobile games (which was released a year prior to season 3) inspired the writer to adopt the same concept for third season storylines. Although the mobile game *Ejen Ali: Agent's Arena* does not have any form of narrative or plot, the Battle Arena concept as worldbuilding element is utilized again for season 3. Importantly, this decision is not made early in the beginning. Rather, this decision is adopted when Wau Animation are brainstorming for content for season 3. Mr. Hilman (excerpt 7.2.1.012) commented that since the concept is already there, it is natural for them to optimize it again for the animation part of the franchise.

> But when we were developing season three, we looked back at the game
> to relate it to the story. If you look at the themes in season three, they were
> inspired by the game, but it's not a one-to-one correlation. The game had
> the concept of an arena, but in the series, the arena was fully fleshed out
> with rules and specific elements to follow. In the game, it's just a single
> match in an arena. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 7.2.1.011**)

Plus, we are the ones in season 3 who introduced the Arena. Basically, because there's already a game, we thought, how can we use this? Before this, we never thought about the Arena. It's not direct inspiration, but it's like, because it's there. The thing is already there. It's like reverse engineering. The game is already there. What can we use from this game? So, we thought, what if there's an arena competition among young agents? (Hilman, MH20230317/ **excerpt 7.2.1.012**)

The bottom-up approach has made Wau Animation flexible in terms of content development. Some production members find it fun workspace as they can explore various creative pursuits to improve their work of *Ejen Ali* TV series and film. This would be true for Mr. Safwan (excerpt 7.2.1.013)**.** As a 3D modeler he is tasked to come up with a variety of artwork to fill the background of various scenes (which is not a priority to pre-production team). Mr. Safwan uses this opportunity to insert in his work into the background which is an enjoyable part of his job. However, sometimes the scene background is also a place for overshadowing narrative material for easter egg purpose. For that reason, every scene is an opportunity for expression and possible overshadowing. In any case, the flexibility shown in background development indicates Wau Animation openness for their staff creative pursuit.

So, let's say, we create packaging for Saf crackers. Something like that. We sneak in these things, but they might not be visible. But if you look for them, you might find them. Sometimes, we do it for fun. Sometimes, the director sees it, and he doesn't notice it…. But from our perspective, because we have to find something to fill that space, to add things like that, Sometimes, what needs to be there in the background is related to the story. From that aspect, it's intentional foreshadowing. (Safwan, MS20230623/ **excerpt 7.2.1.013**)

7.2.1.2   Comic Magazines

I also want to assert that the comic magazine instalments are also being published in accordance with a bottom-up approach. Still, it is important to note that comic magazines and/or webtoon comics are not the core instalment in terms showcasing the main narrative progression as opposed to animation-based instalments (TV series and film). But, as discussed in chapter 6, the comic magazine plays varying roles in the aspect of filling narrative gaps (with *sidemission* and *M.A.T.A* secret file section), worldbuilding tool (extra materials in the magazine that explain elements of the storyworld) and fans engagement (news section, fan artwork section, and puzzle section).

Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.014) indicates that venturing into comic publication for *Ejen Ali* franchise is something intentional since the beginning. However, in terms of content, Wau Animation does not focus on progressing the main narrative in continuance to the either TV series of film. The main comic section of the comic magazine only portrayed a screenshot material taken from the TV series making this instalment a direct adaptation of the TV series storylines. But, as mentioned previously, some additional unique content is added to the comic magazine to increase its market value to consumer. Even in the current stage, comic component of *Ejen Ali* franchise in under experimentation as Wau Animation is in the process of fine tuning this instalment. As mentioned by Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.014), comic magazine for season 3 is built with hand-drawn comic strips instead of screenshot from the animation indicate a milestone achieved for this instalment.

We also venture into comics early at a start of our company. Initially, we focus more on screenshots of the animation, but we include short comics in it, like 'sidemissions'. We work with some smaller comic artists, and then later on, when the relationships are becoming more mature, then we look at how we can grow the comic side. If you look at the latest one, we're doing season three. It's completely hand-drawn, already complete, but I think there, as mentioned earlier, there's a limitation in the speed of how fast we can produce that. And secondly, yeah, the story, we haven't, had the chance to build unique. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.1.014**)

Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.015) indicates huge concern about the speed of publication as the existing pipelines are tailored towards production of animated content instead of publication of comic magazines. Still, the publication of comic magazines is integral for Wau Animation and this mentality is shared throughout the production team.

Our comic, in terms of its turnover rate from ideation to completion, its speed isn't as fast. It's not as fast because here we already have this production team, right? So it's much faster for us from idea to screen, compared to if we were to produce comics from those ideas, because our comic pipeline and workflow aren't as strong as our animation. **(Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ excerpt 7.2.1.015)**

Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.1.016) argues that comic magazines serve as an avenue for additional material about *Ejen Ali* storyworld. Perhaps, comic magazine the place where the production team can use to magnify certain element about the storyworld that does not heavily impact the main narrative yet interesting enough to be told to their consumers. Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.1.017) also agreed by stating that things that does not necessarily portrayed in either TV series or film, yet have some value to the producer, can be embeded

into comic book which make this component valuable to be developed alongside of the main animation instalment. Mr. Reuban also argues that it is important as a mean to serve the fans as they constantly seek new material for *Ejen Ali.*

The top-down approach usually involves grand and overarching narrative to be disassemble into various smaller-stories/plots that are embedded across multiple instalments. In the case of *Ejen Ali* comic magazines, element of overarching narrative seems to be absent since TV series and film are used a primary component for *Ejen Ali* main narrative progression. Therefore, its development is often the result of extra work that needed to be done to support and expand *Ejen Ali* and content franchise. Concerning *Ejen Ali* as transmedia narrative, as the TV series and film is developed in bottom-up paradigm, the comic component also follows suit as the expansion of comic instalment often mimicked the content in the animation part of the franchise.

> Additionally, in terms of comics, we added extra stories. So, these additional stories can be accessed through the comics. People who watched the TV series can continue or learn more about the characters by reading the comics. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 7.2.1.016**)

> I think the comic book, if anything, it's not like an A story. I would call it maybe B story or like a side character story or sometimes we get to see sides of things in comic books that are not necessarily meant for the big screen experience, per se, or a TV screen experience… Even if you miss the comic books, you're not going to miss anything on the big screen… I think they're made especially for fans. Fans, hardcore fans who are who like, I got to have more Ejen Ali content. And they would go out and get a comic book. And for them, they get to spend extra time with these characters who they relate with. (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.2.1.017**)

7.2.1.3 Mobile Games

Different from the TV series, film, and comic magazines, the development of mobile games for *Ejen Ali* is managed by Media Prima through its digital wing, Media Prima Digital. Nevertheless, Wau Animation remains cognizant of the development process and actively participates in the creation of these games. As previously indicated by Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.0.005), approximately 80 percent of the efforts invested in mobile game development are attributed to Media Prima Digital. Additionally, Wau Animation's responsibilities are confined to the preparation of intellectual property materials for integration into the games, as well as their management, ensuring that all intellectual property depicted in the games maintains consistency with other instalments of the franchise.

For *Ejen Ali: Emergency* game, the development of the narrative and its accompanying storyworld are based on existing materials that have been developed for the animation part of the franchise. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.018) said that during the planning of the game, Media Prima Digital and Wau Animation were both aware that they already have a wide range of assets that they can reuse for the game. Utilizing these existing assets might be optimal for the development of the games. Yet, there is no indication that mobile games are developed as a means progressing main narrative from the start. It seems that the production of mobile games is mainly due to varying opportunities that benefit both Media Prima and Wau Animation.

I think initially we had *Agent Ali Emergency* game where the story
involved infiltrating M.A.T.A.'s base and obtaining certain items, so Ejen
Ali ended up having to go through M.A.T.A 's security. And then, the
Emergency game was created because when they were planning it, there
were the assets we had already built because in the early seasons, we had
that. We had our base, we had Droids, we had built those... So, if you
follow the game, it's inspired by season two. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/
excerpt 7.2.1.018)

Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.1.019) also mentions that mobile games can be an avenue
to serve *Ejen Ali* fans. With this game, fans can engage with the characters and experience
being M.A.T.A. agents, interacting with the storyworld while performing numerous feats
and espionage. The mobile games enable Wau Animations ability to provide further
immersion to *Ejen Ali* fans.

I think with games, fans, or anyone, they get to become Ali. They get to
play the part of Ali. Although it's not narratively heavy, they in a way do
get some time to spend with Ali and they get to decide as Ali what I should
do to get over this and these obstacles. So, yeah, the game has that
(Reuban, RS20230223 / **excerpt 7.2.1.019**)

On the Media Prima side, its digital wings, Media Prima Digital can undertake a project
with minimal cost as the IP is already obtained without having to develop themselves or
purchase from other company.

Mr. Haikal is one of key people in Media Prima side that lead the management of
Ejen Ali: Agent Arena tournament (excerpt 7.2.1.020) states that the development of
mobile games for *Ejen Ali* franchise is made possible because they (Media Prima) have
ownership over the *Ejen Ali* IP. He (excerpt 7.2.1.020) also added that at that time the
government through Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) have express

their aspiration on cultivating digital product to nourish the digital sector of the economy. Mr. Haikal (excerpt 7.2.1.022) also mentions that Media Prima Digital have outsourced the development of these games to game developer. Still, they (Media Prima Digital) control the creative parts of the development.

> So, I think that's the reason why they took it because since Ejen Ali is our IP, they made the game. So basically… MPD (Media Prima Digital) initially, came up with this game because MDEC wanted to do it. (Haikal, MH20230220/ **excerpt 7.2.1.020**)

> (Referring to the development of mobile games) it's not on the RMG (Rev Media Group) side either. So I think all these ideas came from Nicholas Sagau, who is now our TMG's Chief Operating Officer. It is the idea implemented by Nicholas Sagau and with the old team (at Media Prima Digital) (Haikal, MH20230220/ **excerpt 7.2.1.021**)

> So, yes, basically, the requirements we want to add, usually aa, add this, add that, add maps, so we will ask aa that aa third-party company to make the game, which is the game developer who makes it, and then yes, they deliver the results. (Haikal, MH20230220/ **excerpt 7.2.1.022**)

Mr. Haikal is personnel from Rev Media Group, a digital publisher which happened to be a subsidiary of Media Prima, that mainly deals with media advertising and marketing. One of Mr. Haikal main responsibility is to optimize e-sports economy in local scene. Mr. Haikal have organized numerous e-sports tournament in Malaysia involving multiple popular mobile games including one tournament for *Ejen Ali* franchise through *Ejen Ali: Agent Arena* mobile game in 2021. Mr. Haikal (excerpt 7.2.1.023) admits that venturing into the mobile games and e-sport tournaments are still in trial phase, perhaps to seek opportunities for further economic advantage and brand exposure.

the first motivation is because we found out that *Ejen Ali*'s game is under my wing, and my job is to do e-sports. And then also from higher up, they'll say, "Oh, let's do an *Ejen Ali* tournament." And MDEC also said, "Hey, we want to level up." If you know, MDEC does it every year… *Ejen Ali*'s game was already there when we joined, we can say it was already there. But it's a soft launch. Soft launch means we didn't do a full-blown promotion…until today because we're still in the trial phase, the first IP in Malaysia for a competitive game from Malaysia. (Haikal, MH20230220/ **excerpt 7.2.1.023**)

In terms of monetization, Mr. Haikal (excerpt 7.2.1.024) admits that it has a long way to go. In-app purchase for monetization might be possible but it requires additional cost to developed to hire game developer to transform existing material that Wau Animation have to in-game additional material like skins, maps, and new mods. For Wau Animation, the mobile games, while offering immersive entertainment to *Ejen Ali* fans, will unlikely host main narrative progression as it is still an experiment. Mr. Hilman, a scriptwriter at Wau Animation (exceprt 7.2.1.025), expressed that the game might or might not perform well in terms of popularity in the market. However, Wau Animation remains hopeful that the mobile games can be a good platform to showcase the *Ejen Ali* storyworld making this platform a good worldbuilding tool for them, especially when the cost is incurred to their giant partner, Media Prima.

the game's monetization is still in development, meaning it can't make money yet. So, we're bleeding money, and again, we have to pay a third-party company separately for every item we want to create, like characters, skins, maps, new mods, everything is paid separately. (Haikal, MH20230220/ **excerpt 7.2.1.024**)

Yeah, and to be honest, the game might not be that popular even though people play it. It's a hit or miss. With hope, if people watch the Arena in Season Three, they might think, "I want to play this," but when they play, they might not feel the same. But since it's already there, let's give it a try. (Hilman, MH20230317/ **excerpt 7.2.1.025**)

7.2.1.4 Vlog, Trading Card Game, and Merchandise

In terms narrative progression, other parts of the franchise besides TV series, film, comic book, and mobile games do not have significant contributions. However, they do have their own function within the franchise. Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.1.026) has stated that merchandise lines is helpful in terms of revenue generation and should not be taken lightly as part of the franchise. Merchandise provides continuous revenue as long as products kept being supplied into the market as opposed to film which relied upon premiering that happen once in a while. Mr. Adam (excerpt 7.2.1.027) also agreed by saying that while merchandising add revenue it also allows fan to connect with the franchise in the long run which is beneficial to the company.

I have to say our main story, our movies and the TV show have the most brand value. But we can't neglect the marketing side of things where I mean by merchandising, those also bring a lot of revenue in, but I don't think we produce enough of those to make that much. We don't sell that many action figures and toys, but we do make, like, pencil, pencil cases and lunch boxes and whatnot... People wanted toys. People wanted merch more than getting a movie ticket, which is only once in several years you get to pay for a movie ticket. But a merchandise could be continuous. Could be a continuous source of income. (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.2.1.026**)

Merchandise is very important for sustaining the company in general. It's mainly to sustain the company, but at the same time, it's to pull the fans back, so they don't go to another IP and forget about us. (Adam Amiruddin, AA20230313**/ excerpt 7.2.1.027)**

In terms of worldbuilding, merchandise seems to not have significant worldbuilding value as most of the time the merchandise design is done by external firms. However, as Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.028) have said that the production team has prepared a style guide for merchandise licensee to adhere to ensure that the IP is properly represented in various product lines.

Usually with (merchandise) licensee, we provide a style guide. Meaning, we will expect them to adhere to a certain style which our internal design team has already prepared everything. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.1.028**)

Parts of the franchise sometimes are treated as marketing materials. One of Wau Animation new venture is to develop short video in the form of Vlog to be published on various video-based social media platforms like Tik Tok, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook Reels. The production team, so far, are more inclined to see this venture as a marketing effort instead of an avenue of narrative progression. As Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.1.030) has said that the micro-plot in the Vlog is written by both the writer and the social media team of Wau Animation indicating its priority of being a marketing material. However, the worldbuilding aspect is apparent as more *Ejen Ali* storyworld can be depicted. Mr. Farhan (excerpt 7.2.1.029) indicates that the contents for the Vlog are still in development, which indicate another instance of bottom-up worldbuilding. As they need to be relevant on social media platform through video shorts, Wau Animation start to develop more content for the storyworld instead of having the pre-planned element of the storyworld to be embedded in these vlogs.

the vlog is not finished yet. I mean, we have a lot more, what has been released is just the beginning episodes. We have a bunch of episodes that we are still working on. Basically, we are in the middle of it. It's still in the script stage. We are still developing the script. So, maybe there will be teasers where fans can relate to, like, "Oh, this is in the tunnel." But basically, on our side, we are still figuring it out. It depends on the scriptwriters. But as for now, fans can predict based on what they know, perhaps in the early stages or in the middle, or maybe at the end of Season Three. But as for now, what the fans know is up to them, but on our side, the vlog timeline is not revealed yet. (Farhan, AF20230408/ **excerpt 7.2.1.029**)

(referring to the Vlog content) Both, yes. Partially from the writers and partially from the social media team (Kamarul, KA20230605/ **excerpt 7.2.1.030**)

Another important component of *Ejen Ali* franchise is its trading card game called *Ejen Ali: Mission Alliance*. It could be treated as merchandise alongside toys and utility items. However, for Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.1.031) the trading card game is special because its artworks and game mechanics are developed in-house and headed by him. In terms of narrative progression, Mr Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.1.031) said that the trading card is not yet significant as it is developed mainly to serve *Ejen Ali* fans. Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.1.031) also indicates that in his pursuit to develop this instalment, he and his design team attempts to ensure that the theme of the trading card game fits the existing theme of *Ejen Ali.* This is another instance of bottom-up approach done by Wau Animation as the development of this instalment is guided by existing narrative and worldbuilding rule.

The card game is special because I developed it with my design team, trying to align it with the theme and flavor of *Ejen Ali* as much as possible. As for comics, there are a few that are canon and a few that are not so canon, so take it with a grain of salt. These media are mainly for Ejen Ali fans. (Kamarul, KA20230605**/ excerpt 7.2.1.031**)

Mr. Kamarul is not one of the 5 main directors of Wau Animation. Yet, he was given the responsibility to develop the trading card game component of *Ejen Ali* franchise. He took this responsibility seriously as card games are not developed merely as card games. Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.1.033) is keen to classify this instalment as Trading Card Game (TCG) which entails more value to the instalment. Much like Pokemon TCG, *Ejen Ali: Mission Alliance* is equipped with a series of cards with unique artwork that can be used as collectibles and at the same time can be played by two people as a board game. Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.1.032) states that he made an effort to write a rule book explaining the game mechanic of the instalment as TCG. Although he understands that being ambitious with the gameplay might hinder local consumer to play, he still optimist that he had done the best that he can to represent *Ejen Ali* storyworld in TCG format.

This is a modern board game. So, during that time, planning to make card games, TCG. Playing card games and TCG are different. Card games are simple, like snap, and something like that. Very simple gameplay. But when they mentioned TCG, I thought, "Okay, I'll do my best to make TCG." But I was overly ambitious. I feel, for the general local scene, people might not be ready for that kind of gameplay because the learning curve is too steep.I understand. In my part, I wrote purely for the rule book. (Kamarul, KA20230605**/ excerpt 7.2.1.032**)

There are a few things that I requested. I asked for specific materials for the cards, printing finishes, and then I requested a certain visual. I didn't want screenshots; I wanted new visuals. But when we did it that way, there were a few people who thought, "Is this a screenshot? No, it's not."

(Kamarul, KA20230605/ excerpt 7.2.1.033)

In the pursuit of an exploratory approach to worldbuilding within the *Ejen Ali* franchise, Wau Animation has implemented a bottom-up production strategy, facilitating the creation, dissemination, and expansion of multiple instalments across diverse media formats. This section illustrates the employment of bottom-up strategy, illustrating several key points. Firstly, the production of television series and films within the franchise unfolds incrementally, with narrative progression and worldbuilding evolving in tandem with each instalment's creation. Instead of constructing the entirety of the narrative landscape at once, Wau Animation adopts a season-by-season approach, along with developing films from fresh perspectives. This methodology affords greater flexibility in storytelling and the portrayal of the storyworld, allowing for the incorporation of materials from other instalments deemed pertinent to enhancing the overall narrative.

Secondly, the publication of comic magazines serves as a complementary platform to animated series and films, offering unique insights into aspects of the storyworld that may be too intricate for inclusion in the animated format. While directly adapted from the main narrative, these comics contribute distinct value to fans, enriching their understanding and engagement with the franchise. Thirdly, the development of mobile games capitalizes on opportunities arising from Media Prima's interest in expanding the *Ejen Ali* franchise into the gaming realm. By partnering with Media Prima, Wau Animation mitigates the inherent costs of game development, utilizing narratives

and storyworld elements derived from existing assets within the animated series, thus adhering to a bottom-up approach.

Finally, ancillary components of the *Ejen Ali* franchise, such as Vlogs and the Trading Card Game (TCG), are approached as distinct endeavors rather than relying on pre-developed artwork from the franchise's inception. This underscores a commitment to fresh creativity and innovation across all facets of franchise expansion. In essence, the *Ejen Ali* franchise exemplifies a transmedia narrative comprising diverse instalments across various formats. The development of these instalments, particularly concerning narrative intricacies and worldbuilding, unfolds incrementally rather than through centralized coordination from the franchise's inception. This bottom-up approach has proven effective within the Malaysian animation industry, demonstrating its efficacy as a means of transmedia storytelling.

7.2.2   Reactive to opportunity and feedback

Complementing the bottom-up approach, Wau Animation also maintains a responsive stance towards opportunities and feedback from industry stakeholders and their fanbase as part of their exploratory worldbuilding technique. This indicates that throughout the process of crafting the narrative and constructing the storyworld, Wau Animation remains receptive to feedback and adaptable accordingly. Ryan (2017) highlights the executions of transmedia storytelling, particularly in popular culture, revolve around pre-existing, well-established brands of content. In contrast, *Ejen Ali* as an intellectual property (IP) does not originate from a decades-long franchise or a previously well-known brand of content. Instead, Wau Animation is introducing a novel brand of animated content to the market, without pre-existing exposure or an established fanbase.

Consequently, the franchise's growth trajectory is anticipated to be uncertain and replete with challenges. It is quite understandable for the production team to harbor apprehensions regarding the reception of their work. As stated in the previous section, Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.1.008) mentioned that Media Prima advised Wau Animation to produce a TV series before committing to a cinematic film, suggesting that both Media Prima and Wau Animation aimed to mitigate the financial risk associated with venturing into the production of a new brand of content.

The imperative to manage risk in the production of *Ejen Ali's* content likely compelled Wau Animation to actively seek and obtain as much information as possible concerning the development of their content and its potential reception among audiences. It is noteworthy that most of *Ejen Ali's* founders have experience in developing popular animated content in Malaysia, as they were once in the production team for *Upin & Ipin*, an older and popular local brand of animation produced by Les' Copaque. This implies that they possess industry experience in the Malaysian animation business. Nevertheless, they continued to solicit advice on their production ideas from industry stakeholders.

As previously stated by Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.2.001), Wau Animation engaged with various parties, including colleagues, industry insiders, and other industry stakeholders, to seek potential opportunities and resources to actualize their intention of producing *Ejen Ali*. Through this approach, Wau Animation managed to pitch *Ejen Ali* to various television stations, such as Nickelodeon and Disney, to secure funding for their endeavor. This demonstrates that even at the earliest stages, Wau Animation possessed the audacity to leverage their existing connections to maximize their chances of realizing their goal.

We frequently engage with various individuals to gather feedback, including friends, industry insiders, and others. This allows us to seek partnerships or financing from a variety of sources, presenting our pitches in numerous venues to maximize opportunities. We have pitch to Disney and Nickelodeon among many others (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.2.001**)

Wau Animation's receptiveness extends beyond the business facets of the venture; they also consistently embrace constructive criticism from industry stakeholders and adapt their approach accordingly. If *Ejen Ali* had originated from print media, akin to many other content franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, it would have been more challenging for Wau Animation to modify elements of the storyworld to align with the narrative requirements of the animation platform. However, as *Ejen Ali* is an original concept, Wau Animation has the flexibility to seamlessly integrate ideas drawn from critical feedback into their existing narrative.

Excerpt 7.2.2.002 illustrates how a government-backed organization, the Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), influenced the foundational concept of *Ejen Ali* during the initial stages of the writing process. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.2.002) revealed that their initial main character was envisioned as a burger seller who happened to be a spy agent, an idea they pitched to MDEC, potentially seeking funding. However, MDEC suggested that, since the animation targeted children, the main character should represent a similar age group, a recommendation that resonated with Wau Animation. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.2.002) indicated that this instance exemplifies one of many occasions where feedback from industry stakeholders played a pivotal role in shaping the franchise's development. It is imperative to reiterate that another critical decision that significantly influenced the franchise's trajectory was Media Prima's insistence (excerpt

7.2.1.008) on developing the animation as a TV series format, which provided substantial exposure to the brand prior to the premiere of the film in 2019.

> During our first version of brainstorming, our main character was initially the burger seller, Bakar. Because at that time, while we were brainstorming, we were actually at my apartment in Shah Alam, and for lunch, we went to have Burger Bakar (grilled burger). Then, someone on the team started to imagine what if the burger seller was actually undercover. Maybe he was secretly delivering messages or something along those lines while serving burgers. That idea wasn't mine; it came from someone else. When we pitched or shared this idea with someone from MDEC, they pointed out that if we wanted the story to appeal to children, the main character couldn't be an older or adult figure; it had to resonate with kids. So, we went back to the drawing board and came up with Ali. Initially, Ali was just a nerdy kid wearing glasses, and then later, we questioned, "Do glasses serve a purpose?" From there, the idea evolved, leading to the creation of Iris and many other elements. There was a lot of feedback. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.2.002**)

Feedback from industry stakeholders is highly beneficial and functional, not only for the business aspects but also for the narrative elements of the franchise. In solidifying their creative endeavours for the *Ejen Ali* franchise, Wau Animation remains receptive to feedback from their audience and fanbase. As the worldbuilding process is exploratory in nature, Wau Animation maintains flexibility and a willingness to implement changes deemed worthwhile. Wau Animation recognizes the importance of obtaining genuine and valuable feedback from their fans. Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.2.003) stated that they have established a Telegram channel to facilitate communication with their fans regarding *Ejen*

Ali. Additionally, Wau Animation pays close attention to feedback from social media platforms to gauge how their content is perceived by their audience.

> That's why we have a Telegram channel, where we gather regular fans who watch and provide feedback. They share their reactions there. Then, on YouTube, people share reviews. In the past, there weren't many reviews during those seasons. Now, even kids want to do them. We can see the feedback, and generally, Season 3 has received quite positive feedback. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 7.2.2.003**)

Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.2.004) expressed that receiving feedback is valuable and contributes to the enjoyment of his work as a writer. At times, he even engaged anonymously in fan discussions of *Ejen Ali* to share his thoughts without revealing his affiliation with the Wau Animation's crew.

> In general, I would say I really enjoy seeing the fans' feedback and discussions. You know, I enjoy writing when people give feedback. And I like it when they don't know who I am, so I can discuss freely without them holding back or filtering out. So, I have a few friends who are not in the industry, and they don't hold back. I really enjoy that kind of fan. (Kamarul, KA20230605/ **excerpt 7.2.2.004**)

Agreeing further, Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.2.005) stated that audience feedback is invaluable, not only to reflect on the performance of a particular instalment in the market but also to shape the storyworld of *Ejen Ali*.

> There were instances when the written narrative and storyworld had to be changed due to fan speculations. The fact that Wau Animation implemented these changes serves as evidence that the development of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld is an ongoing exploratory process. According to Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.2.005), in season 1, there was a

production delay due to an efficiency issue, resulting in the release of episodes in batches instead of continuously from episode 1 to episode 13.

> In season 1, admittedly, the production process is not yet efficient, and we had several delays in production. As a result, season 1 had to be aired in batches… we had to air 4 episodes first and the next month or so, another 4 episodes were broadcasted and then in a couple of months, the rest of the episodes for season 1 were released. Even though Media Prima was not too happy about this, the delay turns out to be beneficial to us… During the first season, we concurrently produced while observing audience reactions. This approach provided invaluable feedback, both direct and indirect, aiding our understanding of audience perspectives. Consequently, we could anticipate audience preferences and adjust our storytelling accordingly. Real-time feedback from audience reactions influenced our creative decisions, guiding our narrative development. However, this feedback loop primarily characterized the first season and partially extended into season 2, For the film, however, we could not do this because the product is already premiered on cinema before we received any feedback from audience. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.2.005**)

Since the episodes in season 1 were aired in batches, Wau Animation had the opportunity to obtain audience feedback while developing the subsequent episodes. Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.2.006) stated that the airing of episode 1 coincided with the production of episode 6. Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.2.006) also shared that the audience managed to accurately speculate the intended twist that was about to happen at the end of the season. Given that the production of the remaining episodes of season 1 was still ongoing, Wau

Animation decided to change the storylines and provide a different plot twist, successfully surprising their fans with the new narrative.

> Okay, interesting things happen based on feedback from the fandom. During Season One, production was ongoing almost parallel to the TV release. For example, when Episode One was on TV, we were working on Episode Six. During Season One, we received feedback that fans had already figured out who was who and the twists. They guessed a lot. So, regarding the number of twists, we had some that we kept hidden. People didn't know; some were obvious, but we thought if we revealed them, it wouldn't be as enjoyable because people already knew. So, we changed the storyline, and we managed to surprise fans because we made changes. We explained the reasons behind the changes because some staff had asked about it. In terms of their movement, every time they are always there. They give theories, discuss things, and now with social media being more open, there's even more engagement. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 7.2.2.006**)

Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.2.005) stated that such changes in storylines could occur in season 1 and, to a minimal extent, in season 2. However, they could not implement this approach for the film, as the feedback was received after the premiere. Another occasion that illustrates fans' influence on the narrative progression can be seen in season 3. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.2.007) shared that there were 3 or 4 plotlines drafted for season 3, but they minimally featured the portrayal of young agents. However, upon receiving feedback from season 2 and the film, and as Mr. Hilman (excerpt 7.2.2.008) mentioned, they were told that the fans desire to see more depiction of young spy agents in *Ejen Ali*. Based on this feedback, Wau Animation decided to accommodate the request in the narratives for season 3.

Because then, a few ideas emerged, like considering three or four plotlines for what we wanted to do for Season Three, but some of these ideas didn't focus much on the young agents, right? And then, we received a lot of feedback after Season 2 and the movie release. Since the movie didn't feature many agent characters, the audience expressed a desire for more screen time for the young agents. So, we thought, "Okay, let's try to continue the story for all these young agents and see what stories we can create." (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.2.2.007**)

Like, the audience during the movie said, "Why aren't there many young agents?" So, for this season, we said, okay, let's take these young agents. Let's create a story about them. That's how it happened. (Hilman, MH20230317/ **excerpt 7.2.2.008**)

By being receptive to feedback and advice from both industry stakeholders and fans, Wau Animation can continuously improve the *Ejen Ali* narratives and its accompanying storyworld. This is made possible because *Ejen Ali* is an original idea and is not restricted by any pre-ordained narrative. With this flexibility, an exploratory approach to narrative progression and worldbuilding can take place. Wau Animation continuously learns what is best for the *Ejen Ali* franchise by listening to feedback and adapting to changes. Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.2.009) stated that by starting with a series, Wau Animation could obtain exposure and fans for *Ejen Ali*. As the franchise grew, the size of the fanbase also expanded. Initially, they thought that *Ejen Ali* would resonate primarily with children, but they realized that adult fans also exist, broadening the fanbase. This realization was perhaps facilitated by listening and reacting to feedback.

Its success, I believe, is because we started with a series. This helped us build a fan base, and as time went on, the fan base grew. The content we created aligned with the taste of our fans. Even though initially, we thought our audience would be teenagers or children, we found that the story was suitable for adults as well. So, it expanded the fan base. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 7.2.2.009**)

In summary, the development of the *Ejen Ali* franchise fueled Wau Animation's responsiveness toward industry advice and fans' feedback exemplifies an exploratory and collaborative approach to worldbuilding and narrative progression. By actively seeking and incorporating feedback from industry stakeholders, fans, and audiences throughout the creative process, Wau Animation has demonstrated a willingness to adapt and evolve their creative vision. This iterative approach has not only allowed them to mitigate risks and align their content with industry standards and audience expectations but has also fostered a dynamic and engaging relationship with their growing fanbase. The success of *Ejen Ali* serves as a testament to the value of embracing an open and responsive stance towards feedback, enabling the creation of a compelling and resonant transmedia franchise.

7.2.3 Striving for continuity

Thus far, the discussion has outlined Wau Animation's franchise expansion approach, characterized by the employment of bottom-up production strategies and continuous responsiveness to feedback, reflecting its exploratory worldbuilding ethos. Preceding sections have explained that the development of diverse instalments, particularly concerning narrative progression and worldbuilding, is tailored to the mode and affordance offered by each instalment. The current configuration of the *Ejen Ali* storyworld emerges as a consequence of incremental worldbuilding across successive instalments rather than being predetermined at the inception at the beginning of the

franchise. Both the bottom-up approach and receptivity to feedback endow Wau Animation with flexibility and adaptability throughout the developmental process. However, it is imperative to note that flexibility does not entail a lack of coordination or narrative disarray among various works.

Wau Animation is committed to ensure that the flexible nature of the development process does not cause inconsistency that may result in confusion among fans regarding the storyworld. The production team have expressed the importance of continuity from one work to another to uphold the integrity of *Ejen Ali* storyworld. From the perspective of Wau Animation, the continuity can be defined in several ways. Mr. Fuad (excerpt 7.2.3.001) explained that continuity is a form of repeated portrayal of worldbuilding elements across several instalments so that each work is perceived to be part of the same storyworld. This is crucial as it allows fans to be exposed to recognizable elements that may shape their experience during consumption of various instalments within *Ejen Ali* franchise. By maintaining consistent elements across various media formats, such as introducing characters in games that later appear in the series, Wau Animation fosters a sense of familiarity among its audience.

> Okay, when we initially created *Ejen Ali*, before it was on TV, we released
>
> the game first. Although the game's style wasn't directly related to the
>
> story, we introduced characters in the game that were part of the series,
>
> creating a sense of continuity. Additionally, in terms of comics, we added
>
> extra stories. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 7.2.3.001**)

In addition to that, Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.3.002) elaborated that continuity necessitates consistency in portraying worldbuilding elements in various work and preventing abrupt changes that might confuse the audience. He critiqued the lazy writing practice of introducing sudden abilities or changes in characters without adequate

explanation, emphasizing the importance of coherent storytelling to preserve the narrative's integrity.

> The first thing is continuity… When I mention continuity, it's like, for example, if a character can do a double jump, the next episode or upcoming episode, when the character appears again, suddenly they can do a triple jump. Without explanation, they can suddenly do that for the sake of the plot or during that moment or scene. That's just lazy writing, without an explanation. (Kamarul, KA20230605/ **excerpt 7.2.3.002)**

Similarly, Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.3.003) posited the importance of narrative continuity across different platforms, including social media. He stressed the need for consistency in portraying both narratives and characters' personalities, even in marketing endeavors like social media engagement. Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.3.003) highlighted the meticulous consideration given to maintaining Ali's character portrayal across various media, ensuring alignment with the fictional universe established by the franchise. This approach not only strengthens the coherence of the narrative but also deepens fan engagement by maintaining a unified storytelling experience across different platforms.

> Very important…We have to make sure the storyline is always canon. No matter what media it's on. It has to be the same narrative. It cannot suddenly branch off into a different storyline. Unless no, actually, even if it's a spinoff that we're doing, we have to make sure it's a direct, continuous storyline because this is the universe that we've built. And I think the fans call it the agent-verse. Yeah. We have to maintain that narrative, those character personalities. Like, what would Ali sound like on social media? So, whoever's running our social media would always have to think, like, what would Ali say in response to this comment? (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.2.3.003**)

In essence, the commitment to continuity and consistency within the *Ejen Ali* franchise serves as a guiding principle for Wau Animation in preserving the narrative integrity. By meticulously aligning worldbuilding elements and character portrayals across various instalments and platforms, the production team endeavors to cultivate a cohesive storyworld that resonates with fans and sustains their investment in the franchise's universe. The concept of continuity within the *Ejen Ali* franchise extends beyond mere narrative coherence; it serves as a cornerstone for integrating various components and enriching the entertainment experience for both audiences and fans.

Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 7.2.3.004) has shared that in the writing process it is natural for the team to set a beginning and an end to guide the plot development. However, he stated that it is normal for plot outlines to diverge during the writing process, particularly in the middle stages. To maintain continuity, the production team will decide on the most sensible plot pathway and adjust accordingly, prioritizing character and story development.

> During writing, we figure out the opening and ending first, and then we just need to fill in the middle. Somehow, when we try to write, write, write, the story naturally evolves So, during the middle, it becomes something totally different, which may not align with the original planning of the ending. So, it naturally unfolds towards something new or something different. When we compare it and see what makes more sense, what serves the story or character development better, we try to adjust.
>
> (Kamarul, KA20230605, **/ excerpt 7.2.3.004**)

Similarly, Mr. Adam (excerpt 7.2.3.005) also emphasized the paramount importance of narrative connectivity across different texts within the franchise. He argued that writers (or at least *Ejen Ali*'s writer) should understand well the way different worldbuilding elements should be connected to one another. He made a case that in the context of *Ejen Ali,* technology (as part of the storyworld) has a direct impact on the story as well as character development exemplified by the role of I.R.I.S. in the narrative. Mr. Adam (excerpt 7.2.3.005) posited that the connection between worldbuilding elements is vital to maintain consistency and audience engagement.

> It is crucial. The relationship between the parent and child is very important, especially in the context of storytelling. Technology, like I.R.I.S., plays a significant role. As a writer, you need to understand how these elements are connected. You need to ensure that the technology and its impact on the characters and the story make sense and are consistent throughout the narrative. It's not just about having cool technology; it needs to serve the story and the character development. So, yes, the connection is vital to maintain consistency and engage the audience in the story. (Adam Amiruddin, AA20230313**/ excerpt 7.2.3.005**)

Moreover, Mr. Adam (excerpt 7.2.3.006) also contended that continuity in narrative development facilitates the emergence of what he terms 'callbacks' which describes a moment within an instalment that reference or remind the audience of interconnected events from previous works. These callbacks serve to deepen the audience's connection to the storyworld, fostering a sense of familiarity and nostalgia among fans while also inviting new audiences to explore the franchise.

When we write, we make sure we capture the attention of people who are not familiar with the series. And it works. This is for people who don't know the characters. But for the fans, the continuity and callbacks from the series help. For example, when they start using I.R.I.S. Neo, I think Alisya or Ali mentions something like, "Atlas?" They think it's Atlas, but it's not. Those who have followed the series will think, "Oh, Atlas is from season two." The fact that the *Ejen Ali* story continues, and the continuity is very important. Callbacks help. (Adam Amiruddin, AA20230313/ **excerpt 7.2.3.006**)

Echoing these sentiments, Mr. Hilman (excerpt 7.2.3.009) stressed the role of continuity in enhancing audience recognition and satisfaction, particularly among dedicated fans consuming content across multiple instalments and media platforms. He posited that continuity not only demonstrates Wau Animation's commitment to reinforce the interconnectedness of the franchise's narrative universe, but it also represents Wau Animation effort to craft a richer and deeper consumption experience to *Ejen Ali* fans.

The narrative trajectory within the *Ejen Ali* franchise is not static; rather, it is dynamic and continually evolving, driven by the production team's commitment to continuity. This commitment entails an ongoing expansion of the narrative scope and exploration of new storylines and character arcs. Mr. Reuban (excerpt 7.2.3.007) articulated this sentiment by highlighting the team's perpetual desire to delve deeper and showcase more of *Ejen Ali*'s storyworld, despite constraints such as budgetary limitations and time restrictions. In response to this enthusiasm, the production team sometimes incorporates additional elements into each instalment, serving as tantalizing teasers for future narrative developments.

(Referring to season 3) Sometimes we do, like, a 3.5 extra because we have stories that we want to tell, but because of time restrictions, because of budgetary reasons, we have to let okay, we'll hold back, but we'll tease a little bit more. We'll tease what's coming next (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 7.2.3.007**)

Furthermore, while the bottom-up approach allows for fresh perspectives in each new work, the pursuit of continuity compels the production team to plant seeds of ideas for future narrative progression. Mr. Farhan (excerpt 7.2.3.008) explained further on this practice by revealing that ideas for future instalments are carefully curated, with a keen focus on character development and thematic coherence. However, Mr. Farhan (excerpt 7.2.3.008) also admitted that these ideas are not concretely set upon future work. Rather, those ideas will be revisited again when the actual production of a certain future instalment takes place, which is consistent with the bottom-up approach as discussed in previous sections.

Actually, in every season that we plan to make or our next movie that we predict in our timeline, we have already planted ideas. For example, after we finished the movie, we discussed what our main theme for Season 3 would be. At the same time, we plotted what we wanted to do for the movie after Season Three. What would be the theme? In the future, the content in general, the plotline for the movie, what about it? If it's a series, what? So basically, we've planted all the ideas in our hands. (Farhan, AF20230408/ **excerpt 7.2.3.008**)

For example, when we started Season 3. So, from Season Three onwards, we could decide if this idea could still be used from what we had done before, if it was already set and could still be used. If not, we would scrap it. Regardless of the world, from the story side, what we question the most is what is going to happen to each character. Like what will happen to Ali in this season? What will happen in this movie and Alisha, General Rama, and Rizuan, everything. We predict, just predict, but it's ongoing in that season or movie, and after that, we decide again. Should we do this or that.

(Farhan, AF20230408/ **excerpt 7.2.3.008** - continued)

Continuity serves as the linchpin of Wau Animation's exploratory worldbuilding approach within the *Ejen Ali* franchise, encompassing various features that promote narrative cohesion and coherence. It also serves as a safeguard that prevents the flexible nature of exploratory worldbuilding (through a bottom-up approach and responsiveness to feedback) from going off on a narrative tangent. By fostering repeated portrayal of worldbuilding elements, ensuring consistency across works, and maintaining continuous narrative progression, the production team orchestrates a unified storytelling experience that engages and captivates audiences. It is worth to note that the notion of continuity adopted by Wau Animation somewhat resembles theoretical understanding of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding as outlined in this thesis.

Mr. Fuad's (excerpt 7.2.3.001) and Mr. Kamarul's (excerpt 7.2.3.002) arguments on maintaining continuity as a way ensure repeated and consistent portrayal of worldbuilding element across several works is similar to Jenkins (2006, p. 116) articulation of embedding "contextualizing devices" across multiple works to avoid audience from becoming disoriented when consuming multiple components within transmedia narrative. Additionally, Mr. Adam's (excerpt 7.2.3.005) notion of callback also reflects Long's (2007) thoughts on the concept of negative capability and migratory

cues. Long (2007) suggests that the insertion of negative capability materials in the worldbuilding aspect invokes a sense of questioning, which he refers to as migratory cues, among the audience to motivate them to consume more texts. Mr. Adam's perspective, however, is to invoke the sense of callback through a continuity paradigm so that fans may relate to or be reminded of different narrative instances from various instalments, thereby activating a sense of pleasure in reading *Ejen Ali* materials across platforms. This strategic utilization of continuity not only enhances the richness of the narrative tapestry but also underscores Wau Animation's commitment to providing a cohesive and immersive entertainment experience for fans.

In conclusion, this chapter has thoroughly examined the transmedia production of the *Ejen Ali* franchise and the exploratory worldbuilding strategy implemented by the production team. It successfully addressed the first objective of this thesis by exploring the adoption of multiple media formats for the expansion of the *Ejen Ali* franchise, underscoring the production team's commitment to the transmedia production paradigm. Additionally, the chapter met the third objective by delving into the engagement with the production team behind *Ejen Ali*, primarily composed of staff from Wau Animation.

Through interviews conducted with key members of the production team, the chapter outlined the findings regarding the development of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative and the exploratory nature of its worldbuilding process. The discussion revealed Wau Animation's steadfast commitment to a multi-platform structure for *Ejen Ali*, highlighting the studio's strategic approach to engaging audiences across diverse media channels. Furthermore, the chapter expounded upon the exploratory nature of the worldbuilding approach employed by Wau Animation, shedding light on the creative processes and methodologies involved in shaping the narrative universe of *Ejen Ali*.

This exploratory approach enables Wau Animation to be flexible in their storytelling, which the production team views as a strength. However, ensuring that all components of the *Ejen Ali* franchise remain cohesive is also important. Given that *Ejen Ali* is a multi-platformed franchise consisting of interconnected works (as illustrated in chapter 6), the exploratory approach appears to be fruitful for Wau Animation. The interviews revealed that this approach is achieved through three distinct formulas: a bottom-up production strategy, reactivity to feedback and opportunities, and striving for continuity. The next chapter will explore the collaborative authorship model that has been instrumental in the success of *Ejen Ali*, emphasizing the collective efforts of diverse contributors in crafting a cohesive and captivating narrative experience. Through these insights, a deeper understanding of the collaborative and dynamic nature of *Ejen Ali*'s production process will be attained.

CHAPTER 8: THE COLLABORATIVE AUTHORSHIP OF *EJEN ALI*

This chapter will delve into the structure of collaborative authorship revolving around the *Ejen Ali* franchise. Providing additional insight apart from that in Chapter 7, this chapter is also intended to satisfy the third objective of this research, which is to analyse the production strategy of developing the *Ejen Ali* franchise as a transmedia narrative. Specifically, this chapter will visit the concept of authorship by examining three key segments that illuminate the multifaceted nature of creative collaboration. Firstly, the partnership model between Wau Animation and Media Prima Bhd (MPB) will be explored, shedding light on the collaborative framework that underpins the development and expansion of the franchise. Secondly, the circle of authorship surrounding *Ejen Ali* will be analysed, delineating the diverse array of contributors and their respective roles in shaping the narrative universe. Lastly, the management of organizational creativity will be studied, examining the strategies employed by Wau Animation to foster a collaborative and dynamic creative environment conducive to the continued success of the franchise. Through these discussions, I aim to provide insight into the collaborative ethos that drives the evolution of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia phenomenon.

8.1   Description on partnership

In the aspect of business operation and economic ventures, Wau Animation has teamed up with Primeworks Studio to cultivate *Ejen Ali* into a marketable intellectual property within the media industry. Essentially, Wau Animation functions as an animation-focused production company, specializing in the development of *Ejen Ali* animated content. Conversely, Primeworks Studio is a multifaceted production company renowned for its prowess in various aspects of the creative content business, including content sales, film distribution and marketing, animation, talent management, licensing, and merchandising. As a subsidiary of Malaysia's largest media and entertainment conglomerate, Media Prima Bhd (MPB), Primeworks Studio operates within a broad spectrum of media-related

endeavours spanning television, print, radio, out-of-home advertising, content creation, and digital media. Through this collaboration, *Ejen Ali* has evolved into a jointly owned intellectual property, shared between Wau Animation and MPB.

Mr. Fuad (excerpt 8.1.0.001) explained that the collaboration between Wau Animation and Media Prima Berhad was initiated with support from government-backed organizations, the Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC). Previous to the partnership model, local producers had been benefiting from government grants. However, the government expressed interest in encouraging partnerships between local producer with private corporations. In response, Media Prima actively sought suitable projects to partner with. Wau Animation seized this opportunity and pitched *Ejen Ali* to Media Prima Berhad.

> Yes, exactly (referring to *Ejen Ali* as a product of joint venture). During that time when we were discussing with Media Prima, they were actively looking for such collaborations. And during that time, MDEC was also promoting this kind of relationship rather than grant-based funding ... because before this, people were getting grants... So, they wanted to encourage collaborations. Another example that followed the same model is Didi and Friends with Astro. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 8.1.0.001**)

Although the production team (in an array of interviews) have shown their reservations in revealing structure of the profit-sharing revolving *Ejen Ali,* they were expressive in terms explaining the collaborative nature between Wau Animation and MPB.

Because right from the beginning when we pitched the idea, they expressed interest in joining. So, when we were negotiating on percentage of ownership, I was quite accommodating. The only thing we is want creative control. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 8.1.0.002**)

We have the final say on the creative control… They (MPB) co-own the IP of *Ejen Ali*. The company has no connection, it's purely a hundred percent owned by us. Faiz Hanafiah, MFH20230726/ **excerpt 8.1.0.003**)

As highlighted by Mr. Faiz (excerpt 8.1.0.003) and Mr. Usamah (excerpt 8.1.0.002), Wau Animation holds the definitive authority regarding creative decisions concerning *Ejen Ali*. This would indicate that they have the autonomy over narrative construction and worldbuilding of *Ejen Ali* especially in the animation format. Regardless of the creative control, Wau Animation still have to send their work to MPB and listen to their feedback as partner.

Having creative control does not mean we don't really need to care about their (MPB) opinion in terms of creativity. During the first season, for the pilot episode, once it's ready, we submitted it to the Media Prima team, and they gave their feedback on it. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 8.1.0.004**)

Mr. Usamah noted that the positive reception of the *Ejen Ali* content in the market has helped improve their reputation as content creators. In their early startup days, Wau Animation insisted on having control over creative aspect of *Ejen Ali* from Media Prima Berhad (MPB), though they had to be flexible in profit-sharing negotiations to secure this control. The success of their work in the market likely showcased their abilities, even as a new company, leading MPB to be more flexible about the creative aspects of the franchise. Mr. Usamah suggested that if their work had not been successful, MPB might have been stricter about the creative direction of *Ejen Ali*.

We have insisted on retaining that creative control, but at the same time, the reception of our work also matters. I think if we insisted on creative control, but what came out was not watched by anyone, maybe they'll fight us. Thankfully, our products are successful. So, when we wanted to partner with Disney, Media Prima negotiated, and they told Disney that Wau Animation reserves final creative say as the creator. So, it goes well for us, and now that we have this reputation, I think they help in various ways when we want to work with anything in the future, we already have a portfolio that says, okay. You see, even with our final creative control, we can achieve this kind of outcome, this kind of success. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 8.1.0.004)**

Mr. Fuad (exceprt 8.1.0.005) further clarified the nature of the relationship between Wau Animation and Primework Studio, by extension Media Prima Berhad. For Mr. Fuad, the relationship is basically a collaborative venture between two companies with equal voices. It would seem that Wau Animation had been anxious over the possibility of working with media giants such as Media Prima Berhad requiring them to give 100% ownership to the conglomerate. However, things happened for the better since they do not have to commit to that and still retain autonomy over creative pathway. Still, Wau Animation is more than willing to consider feedback from MPB as they have the expertise in the content market.

In terms of production, Wau Animation handles that. But TV3, Primeworks, they handle distribution and licensing collaborations. Okay, with Media Prima, we share and own the IP together. So, the deal or partnership is a joint effort... It's the same. It means they will look for licensing opportunities, discuss if it fits, and if it's okay, we'll sign up as a straight partner. Then they will produce those items, and we get a percentage from the royalties. Okay, I'll clarify a bit. Initially, everyone was worried about this, meaning in the industry. When dealing with broadcasters, they want 100%, meaning they want to have the final say, which is somewhat true. But when we discuss, we make sure that doesn't happen. Not to say they don't have a say in the story. For example, if we create a story that seems nonsensical, they can say it's nonsensical, and we have to listen to some extent. We revise and do this. But at the end of the day, creative control lies with us. But because of the collaborative spirit, the partnership, we don't diminish their rights. It's not like "I'll do what I want." No, there's none of that. So I think it's somewhat better. In the past, when we did an IP, it was always with a broadcaster, and they wanted things a certain way, but it depends on how you talk to the broadcaster.

(Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 8.1.0.005)**

However, Wau Animation is also aware that Primeworks Studio as well as MPB have contributed numerous resources to ensure the production of *Ejen Ali* can be successful. Having to partner with Primeworks Studio, by extension MPB, has benefited Wau Animation in various ways concerning the development, promotion, distribution, and licensing of *Ejen Ali*. In terms of development, Primeworks Studio have been actively sharing their thoughts and experience that help shape the narrative of *Ejen Ali*. While the writing process is entirely the responsibility of Wau Animation, they consistently seek

advice from Primeworks Studio regarding the animation works. Some advice from Primework Studio has proved to be crucial and important to move the franchise forward. Mr. Reuban is the editor of Wau Animation and handle a great deal of checking and editing animation works so that it can be broadcasted to the public. He (excerpt 8.1.0.006) expressed that MPB have been helpful in assisting him and guiding him through the process especially in preparing *Ejen Ali* animation to be broadcasted in television.

> It's definitely a very healthy partnership. They provide us with a lot of advice and a lot of technical skills, especially because we don't really know much about broadcasting, and I don't have a history of broadcasting. So, whenever I ask them about if we're talking technical skills, they would offer me a lot of technical skills. Whenever I needed them, they were always there. But if you're talking from a story point of view, they were also very how to say this? They are very impactful, I guess, because if you see early on, very first teaser of Ali, I think it's on YouTube out there, there were bullets in it. And one of the first people to say, like, hey, you're not allowed to use bullets in a kid show was them. And so eventually, that's how we switched from bullets to blasters with lasers. It's a more kid friendly thing. So that was a huge influence of Media Prima in a story and narrative. (Reuban, RS20230223/ **excerpt 8.1.1.006)**

MPB through Primework Studio also contributed in terms of promotion of *Ejen Ali* franchise. Having to own numerous media outlets, MPB is in the position of having large enough resources to increase *Ejen Ali's* brand exposure to the media market. Mr. Faiz (excerpt 8.1.0.007) and Mr. Adam (81.008) agreed that having MPB as a partner has been valuable to bring exposure and visibility for *Ejen Ali's* brand. Not only that. The influence that came with being media giants also helped Wau Animation to obtain additional partnerships. The partnership between Wau Animation and Disney as

mentioned by Mr. Usamah (excerpt 8.1.0.004) resulted in the production of season 3 of *Ejen Ali* TV series to be released on Disney+ Hotstar platforms serves as evidence toward the strength of MPB to drive *Ejen Ali* franchise forward.

> I think in terms of our partners. Our partner is Media Prima. So they use their strengths, which is visibility, exposure, so they can push it (*Ejen Ali* brand awareness) back then, everywhere you looked, you could see *Ejen Ali* posters, people talking about *Ejen Ali* on the radio, on TV. So, I think that also helped push the ticket collection. (Faiz Hanafiah, MFH20230726/ **excerpt 8.1.0.007**)

> Exposure, exactly. I forgot the word exposure. With the presence of a large media conglomerate like Media Prima and Disney, we hope they can take the product outside. Sometimes, we have to do it ourselves as well. With them, things like that. Since Media Prima itself owns TV stations, they also handle the promotional side of things. For example, when we made the Ejen Ali movie and Media Prima was involved, we had our own Radio NTV channel for promotions, so we didn't have to spend extra money for that. (Adam Amiruddin, AA20230313/ **excerpt 8.1.0.008**)

In essence, the symbiotic collaboration between Wau Animation and Primeworks Studio has demonstrated its efficacy in mutually supporting one another's strengths. On one hand, Wau Animation exhibits its prowess in crafting top-tier animation content, while on the other hand, Primeworks Studio provides the extensive resources necessary to propel the franchise to unprecedented heights of success. This partnership stands as a testament to the power of synergy in the entertainment industry, where the fusion of creative talent and ample support infrastructure results in a formidable force driving the success of endeavours such as the *Ejen Ali* franchise.

Beyond the business dynamics that underpin the franchise's advancement, it is equally imperative to acknowledge the significance of the collaborative efforts invested in narrative development and worldbuilding. While financial backing certainly plays a pivotal role, the cohesion and ingenuity displayed in shaping the narrative arc and expanding the fictional universe of *Ejen Ali* are equally vital components in its journey towards prominence. Central to this collaborative narrative endeavour is the concept of authorship revolving the *Ejen Ali* franchise. It encapsulates not only the creative input from individuals directly involved in the production process but also the collective imprint of a diverse array of talents and perspectives. The richness of the *Ejen Ali* universe owes much to this collaborative authorship, wherein each contributor adds layers of depth and authenticity to the overarching narrative tapestry. It is this collaborative ethos that infuses the franchise with a sense of dynamism and vitality, ensuring its enduring appeal to audiences across diverse demographics.

8.2   Circle of authorship revolving *Ejen Ali*

The notion of authorship holds significant relevance within the realm of transmedia storytelling scholarship, as it pertains to the process of worldbuilding analysis. Martin and Sneegas (2020) introduce the concept of authorial worldbuilding as one of methodology for evaluating the structural complexities of transmedia narratives. Specifically authorial worldbuilding emphasizes the pivotal role of the author as the primary architect of the storyworld, viewing it as a manifestation of their creative vision and cognitive processes. Thus, dissecting transmedia storyworlds through the lens of authorial worldbuilding necessitates a deep exploration of the author's creative expression and procedures in constructing the fictional universe.

The perspective of author as an authority in the implementation of worldbuilding is expanded by Wolf (2014) as he argues that transmedia work will often involve a number of authors instead of just one. Wolf (2014, p. 268) describe the idea of "circle of

authorship" to conceptualize his thought that the notion of authorship represents set of circles expanding from the original creators of a story world. As the circle grows, the authority over the storyworld diminished yet the contribution from each author toward the expansive storyworld is valuable. In the innermost circle are the creators themselves, the originator of the world. Moving outward, you have people like heirs, estate managers, and those who continue the story's legacy (Wolf, 2014). Beyond them are employees, freelancers, and creators of related works and finally, there are fans who add their own twists to the story (ibid).

Freeman (2017) further enriches the understanding of authorship in the context of transmedia storytelling by highlighting the need for authorial control amidst the expansion of a franchise. However, Freeman (2017) also acknowledges the inevitable proliferation of voices within transmedia narratives as additional authors tend to assert their own authorial uniqueness when contributing to the collective construction of a transmedia work. In alignment with these discussions, Jenkins (2006, p. 101,108) elucidates the concepts of "synergistic storytelling" and "collaborative authorship" as integral components of transmedia narrative development. Synergistic storytelling involves the coordinated efforts of multiple entities to create a cohesive entertainment franchise across various platforms, with an emphasis on maintaining aesthetic coherence. Conversely, collaborative authorship emphasizes the recruitment of skilled creators from diverse media formats to contribute to the expansion of the transmedia narrative, celebrating the freedom of creative expression while still recognizing the originating creator's overarching control over narrative progression.

The concept of authorial authority in the articulation of authorship in context of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding cannot be ignored as the storyworld originates from the creative cognitive process implemented by the author(s). Therefore, I believe that this thesis should recognize that without authors, *Ejen Ali* would not have

materialized into a successful franchise as it currently is. Upon engaging with the production team on the development of *Ejen Ali* franchise as a multi-platformed work, I found that the notion of authorship remains crucial factor in ensuring that *Ejen Ali*'s storyworld is represented in cohesive manner across various instalments involving several media format.

As a franchise, there are several instalments that have been developed for *Ejen Ali* such as TV series, cinematic film, comic magazine, webtoon comic, mobile games, trading card games and an array of merchandise. In section 7.2.1, I have highlighted several authorship figures in my description of the development process of varying instalments within *Ejen Ali* franchise. Based on that discussion, it is clear that as a transmedia franchise, *Ejen Ali* is a product of numerous authors with each develop their own iteration of *Ejen Ali* specific to the platform that they have expertise in. As mentioned previously, the continuity mentality in Wau Animation ensure that each component, although developed by different parties, need to have some form of connection with one another unifying them in a single storyworld

As an animation company, Wau Animation utilizes production pipeline tuned for animation production which make TV series and film their core product. This production pipeline consists of pre-production, production, and post-production. Pre-production generally handles the writing process, storyboarding, and concept development. The material from pre-production which is largely in the form of script, storyboard, and concept artwork are sent to the next stage of the pipeline, production, which handles voice recording, sound production, animation production, and 3D modelling. The asset from the production is later sent to post-production which generally consists of lighting, compositing, editing, and rendering. This production pipeline is the engine that drives the company forward. While it undertakes production for the major instalments (TV series and film) this pipeline also undertake minor animation job pertaining to *Ejen Ali* franchise

such as its Vlog content, animation for marketing materials, and special occasions project like *Ejen Ali: Misi Juang.*

Mr. Fuad (excerpt 8.2.0.001) had admitted that specialization of the production pipeline toward animation work make it challenging for Wau Animation to produce content in other media format.

> If you're dealing with other things like comics, when we want to produce comics, we need to set up a comic department and hire the right people to make comics. So, the challenge is, once you extend, you need to manage that extension. So far, there haven't been any issues or challenges that couldn't be overcome. It's normal. Even our productions always face ups and downs. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307 / **excerpt 8.2.0.001**)

However, this does not hinder Wau Animation from expanding its *Ejen Ali's* storyworld into comic format. Wau Animation also established a comic department to undertake the development of *Ejen Ali's* content in comic form. Interestingly, this comic format exists in the form of print media as well as digital and online media. The print version is a combination of several publications which are highlighted in chapter 6. It is worth noting that the printing and publication aspect of this comic book is outsourced to external company which is documented in the comic book itself. It is shown in the comic magazine that both Wau Animation and Primeworks Studio are the producers of the comic magazine and Armoni Gold Mind Sdn Bhd is the publisher of the comic magazine.

Wau Animation also invests in the development of a trading card game (TCG) to further utilize *Ejen Ali* IP and expand the franchise. The development of TCG is not through a department in Wau Animation. Rather, the product development is spearheaded by an individual in Wau Animation, specifically one of its writers and storyboard artist, Mr Kamarul. Mr. Kamarul work was supervised by one of the directors, specifically Mr. Fuad as Chief Brand Officer. As mentioned in previous sections, the development of TCG

have undergone detailed thought process as it is not only playable as board game (as it is complete with a set of written game rules), but its unique artwork may also formulate its utility as collectible item for fans.

Regarding the mobile games, the development efforts are majorly undertaken by Media Prima Digital, a subsidiary and digital wing of Media Prima Bhd. There are two mobile games available to the public which are *Ejen Ali: Emergency* and *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena.* As mentioned by Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.2.0.005), 80% of the effort in developing the games is handled by Media Prima Digital (MPD), which may indicate the storylines for the game especially *Ejen Ali: Emergency* are authored by this company. For the *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* game, there is no storyline available. However, the development of 'battle arena' concept (as part of *Ejen Ali* universe) was developed by MPD to venture into multiplayer game format. With multiplayer ability embedded in the game, an e-sport tournament has been organized to gain exposure for the franchise while experimenting with games and e-sports as sustainable business model in Malaysian settings. The e-sport tournament is handled by other Media Prima subsidiary, a digital publisher known as Rev Media Group (RMG)

In addition to creating content-based instalments, Wau Animation strategically leverages the *Ejen Ali* intellectual property (IP) to diversify its revenue streams through the production of a wide range of merchandise. This merchandise not only includes physical products featuring the franchise's artwork but also extends to branded collaborations with various companies. While these merchandise and brand-integrated products may not directly influence narrative progression or worldbuilding within the *Ejen Ali* universe, they play a pivotal role in enhancing brand visibility and generating revenue for Wau Animation. Despite their absence in shaping the narrative landscape, Wau Animation recognizes the significance of these initiatives in bolstering the

franchise's commercial success and fostering a deeper connection with fans through tangible consumer products.

But when it comes to creating an IP, there are various values, like collaborations. For example, collaborations with brands like Carry Beck Busker shampoo. These things have additional value, and that value is quite high. (Fuad Md Din, FMD20230307/ **excerpt 8.2.0.002**)

Yes, especially with collaborations. Brand collaborations bring in significant value. (Haikal, MH20230220/ **excerpt 8.2.0.003**)

The circle of authorship revolving *Ejen Ali* encompasses not only Wau Animation's internal production pipelines for animation work and the comic department but also the creative input of Mr. Kamarul. External contributors, primarily Media Prima Digital and Rev Media Group, take the helm in crafting the mobile game instalments, thereby expanding the collaborative network beyond the confines of the studio. Additionally, while their direct impact on the main narrative and storyworld development may be limited, various undisclosed companies have been carefully selected by Wau Animation to act as licensees. These partners are granted permission to utilize the *Ejen Ali* IP in restricted capacities, enabling them to develop lines of merchandise. This strategic alliance not only diversifies revenue streams but also extends the reach of the franchise into new consumer markets, solidifying its presence in the broader cultural landscape. This circle of authorship is visually represented with illustrations below.
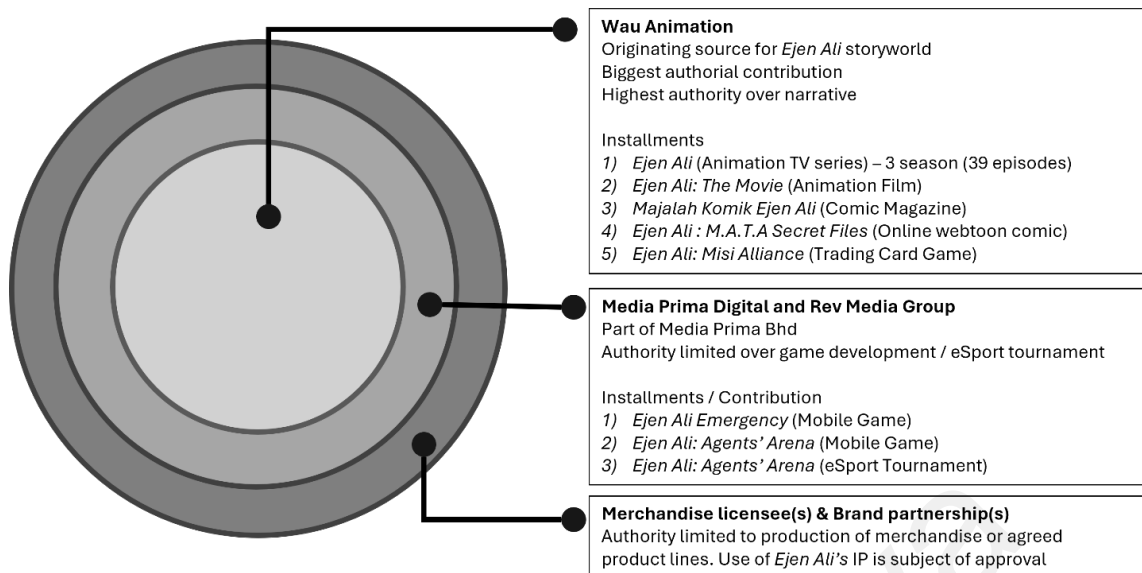
Wau Animation
Originating source for *Ejen Ali* storyworld
Biggest authorial contribution
Highest authority over narrative

Installments
1) *Ejen Ali* (Animation TV series) – 3 season (39 episodes)
2) *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (Animation Film)
3) *Majalah Komik Ejen Ali* (Comic Magazine)
4) *Ejen Ali : M.A.T.A Secret Files* (Online webtoon comic)
5) *Ejen Ali: Misi Alliance* (Trading Card Game)

Media Prima Digital and Rev Media Group
Part of Media Prima Bhd
Authority limited over game development / eSport tournament

Installments / Contribution
1) *Ejen Ali Emergency* (Mobile Game)
2) *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* (Mobile Game)
3) *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena* (eSport Tournament)

Merchandise licensee(s) & Brand partnership(s)
Authority limited to production of merchandise or agreed
product lines. Use of *Ejen Ali's* IP is subject of approval

Figure 7.1: Visual description on *Ejen Ali* circle of authorship

As we move forward, it's crucial to acknowledge the extensive network of contributors, both organizational and individual, involved in crafting *Ejen Ali*. With numerous authors shaping its narrative, the need for a structured managerial approach becomes apparent to ensure coherence within the franchise. In the subsequent section, I will explore the management strategies employed by Wau Animation as the principal author to effectively guide and coordinate the diverse creative inputs that shape the world of *Ejen Ali*.

8.3 Managing organizational creativity

It is a natural for transmedia narrative to expand with more instalments being added to the franchise (Wolf, 2014). However, with involvement of numerous works, a discourse on maintaining cohesiveness among numerous works started to take place. Wolf (2014) and Freeman (2017) mention the notion of canonicity and its relationship with authorial authority of a given transmedia narrative. Canonicity refers to the level of originality of a set of narratives or elements of worldbuilding as it is portrayed in an instalment in relation to its originator (Freeman, 2017; Wolf, 2014). Works by the main author and originator of the storyworld are considered to have the most canon material. Comparatively, works developed from author with extended authority from the originator

might have less canonicity to it. Furthermore, incoherent work developed by other author beside the originator might challenge its canonicity to the original storyworld.

Nonetheless, Wolf (2014) maintains that managing numerous works in a given transmedia franchise requires the originator to determine the position of specific author in a circle of authorship. The clear position of varying authors allows the originator to delegate amount of authority in expanding the storyworld and possible extending the main narrative progression. For Jenkins (2006), the originator must involve themselves in the production/publication/development of transmedia extension even though it is carried out by different party. Jenkins (2006) exemplified his thought with the role of Wachowski (then) brother in the development of *The Matrix*'s content in animation format. He said that the Wachowskis as the originator of the storyworld engaged with the production of different media iterations and going as far as wrote and direct content for the game, drafted scenarios for the animated short and, co-wrote a few of the comics (Freeman, 2017; Jenkins, 2006).

The authorship revolving *Ejen Ali* somewhat resonates with scholars' articulation as reviewed above. However, upon closer examination, the authorship surrounding *Ejen Ali*, particularly the role of Wau Animation as the main author and originator is uniquely formulated. I want to highlight that the uniqueness of *Ejen Ali* authorship can be seen with two main arguments. The first one is that there is no single individual that can be attributed as the main author or originator of *Ejen Ali*. Instead, *Ejen Ali* is a biproduct of collective work of the production pipeline. Second, except for licensee (s), involving authors (the comic department, Mr. Kamarul, Media Prima Digital, and Rev Media Group) are delegated with some degree of authority as well as autonomy over narrative development and worldbuilding as long as their work does not challenge the continuity within *Ejen Ali* franchise.

In regard to the first argument, it has been expressed that *Ejen Ali* did not originate from an individual creation. Rather, it is a collective work primarily spearheaded by the five directors of Wau Animation. Even the CEO, Mr. Usamah (excerpt 8.3.0001) made a claim that *Ejen Ali* was not his idea and pursuing this IP is a group decision,

> To be honest, a lot of the ideas in the first part weren't even mine. Like at the beginning when we were selecting the IP, we went through this whole process. There were five of us directors when we started the company. So, I told the team, okay, let's each go back and think of what ideas we can come up with, and come up with at least three to five ideas, and then we'll come back, discuss, and shortlist them, and try to build upon all the ideas, see which ones have potential. So, out of that list of at least 25 ideas that we gathered, the one about Malaysian Spy, it wasn't even mine. I remember, I don't remember if it was Syafiq or Fuad because I can't recall, when I asked them, they couldn't remember either. But the spark for that idea came from someone else. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 8.3.0.001**)

It is undeniable that the five founders of Wau Animation are the originators of *Ejen Ali*. However, they are not the main author of *Ejen Ali* even for the main instalments which are the TV series and film. The exploratory nature of worldbuilding has made Wau Animation as organization that appreciates creative expression from all parts of its pipeline. Additionally, the development of narrative is also attributed to team effort rather than individuals' authoritative direction. Even if a general narrative pathway is provided by the leaders, the rest of the team will have influence over the actual narrative that will be portrayed on screen. Mr. Usamah (excerpt 7.3.3.002) as one of the leaders at Wau Animation expressed the importance of listening to the staff opinion and incorporate them

in the development of narrative. Consequently, Mr. Safwan (excerpt 7.3.3.003), a staff member, shared that the door to the directors is always open to express his feedback.

> I didn't think of everything on my own. In fact, many times, even after I've written something, the team would provide more ideas like "This won't work, that won't work." So, we discussed how to fix it. So, if I were to say, it was really a team effort. Faiz always says something like, "Here at Wau, it's not like there's one idea passed to the team and then the team just follows along." Chances are, when you do that, if you don't put your heart into it or don't think about how to improve that idea, … but here we always urge the team. Try to inspire them to make sure, okay, when you get a task, when you get a job, how do you include it? How do I put my experience? How do I put my essence? How do I put my idea into it? So, in a way, we want that idea to grow, to grow, to grow even better. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 7.3.3.002**)

> Yes, definitely. If there's something to say, it's always open. Directors always encourage giving feedback, especially in terms of design, pacing, and so on, just let them know. (Safwan, MS20230623/ **excerpt 7.3.3.003**)

Specific to the animation production pipeline, as well as extending to the comic department and TCG development team, Wau Animation always maintain as open door policy to its staff. This is recognized by all levels of the production pipeline. Although the staff is aware that all decisions regarding *Ejen Ali* storyworld are made by the five main directors, they are encouraged to voice out concerns and ideas to improve the quality of *Ejen Ali*. This makes Wau Animation a nurturing space for creative expression and the work culture has benefited *Ejen Ali* franchise.

Not necessarily, because the founder may have a vision, and that vision will be visualized in storyboards. But when the Animation department gets it, they don't necessarily have to follow it a hundred percent. There's still openness, space for them to explore what might be more suitable or, for example, for a scene to be more impactful. Scenes with action might need to be faster or when there's a strong emotional scene. An animator may have their own approach, and if they feel their idea is more suitable or better, it will be discussed with the director. Okay, is it good or not? We have another idea, okay or not? If it's okay, then proceed. (Dania, DM20230330/ **excerpt 8.3.0.004)**

Mr. Kamarul (excerpt 8.3.0.004) added to the thought as he expressed that as an artist that work with writing and storyboarding, he always tried to offer his voice into the director's vision on *Ejen Ali.* The goal is to get the best version of *Ejen Ali* as possible.

Usamah Zaid is my leader, and he guides us, shares his vision. So, I try to work around his ideas and propose different perspectives from time to time. There are a few hits or misses, and some ideas are taken but altered. We aim to get the best version of everything on the table. There's always a rewrite session; it's not a one-time thing... I had autonomy to do anything, but I decided to have a flavor of the *Ejen Ali* world. I tried to incorporate elements like the core and so on, such as energy and Azurium (Kamarul, KA20230605/ **excerpt 8.3.0.005)**

It is natural for the directors to provide vision for the production team to materialize. However, there are also instances where elements in *Ejen Ali* storyworld come from individuals not from the directors or even the writers team. Because it is simply a good idea, they improved and adopted it into the narrative. For example, Mr.

Faiz (excerpt 8.3.0.006) stated that the idea of using the concept of magnet in one of Ali's gadgets came from storyboard artist, Mr. Amirul Anas.

> During that time, in that process, the script provided certain suggestions. They wanted Ali to be like this, and then they were open to other, maybe better, ideas. So, at that time, a storyboard artist, Amirul Anas, who was relatively new, came up with the idea of the magnet. When he posted it in our group, our R&D artist, Haziq, saw it and improvised on Anas's idea. He suggested adding a magnet to push things, and they continued refining the concept. (Faiz, FS20230624/ **excerpt 8.3.0.006**)

As Wau Animation adopts open door policy and celebrates individual creative expression and artistic strength, there is a need for the narrative to be consistent. For many staff in the production pipeline, having to embody the characters, their personalities and characteristics is crucial. Check and balance within the writing process is needed. Therefore, even if new writer is employed, check and balance from another writer will prevent new writer from straying too much from the storyworld.

> So in our discussions, usually Usamah will tell us, "All right, in this episode, we want Ali to find out about this and that." So with those keywords, the writers will try to imagine what could happen, what should happen, and what shouldn't happen. So usually, when Usamah has given us a plotline for an episode. We sit down and decide what will happen and write … Once we've discussed it, everyone will have a screen to write on their own. So we'll list down moments where, for example, emotional scenes are needed. So we write those down first. And then when we bring it up for discussion. (Adam Amiruddin, AA20230313/ **excerpt 7.3.3.007**)

What's interesting when you have multiple writers, I'll tell them my scene and I'll say, "Ali gets punched, Ali gets thrown, Ali feels angry," etc. And then others will provide feedback, saying, "I don't think Ali would react this way. I think he should react differently." Especially for me, when I first came in, I was quite inexperienced when it came to understanding Ali's universe and characteristics. Other writers will always help me in that sense, saying something like, "No, Alisha would never do it this way. It's not her characteristic." So I have to rework the story accordingly. The involvement of multiple writers is crucial. (Adam Amiruddin, AA20230313/ **excerpt 7.3.3.007 - continued**)

Checks and balances also happen across departments. When a work is sent from one department to another, the receiving department will check and request for clarity if needed. This goes to show that every part of the production pipeline embodies the ownership of *Ejen Ali* storyworld and strives to ensure cohesiveness in their work.

They (the writer) will create a draft first, covering the beginning, middle, and end. They focus on key points…When things are roughly ready, they give the storyboard team the script to read. The next day, they brief us. During the brief, we discuss why this and that, why a character is doing something, is the character just sitting there, and so on. Sometimes, when reading the script, we only see the perspective of one character. But there are other characters too. Sometimes we forget about them, so during the discussion, we ask why this, why not that, what is the character doing, and so on. If there are difficulties in visualizing, we discuss it and try to understand why. (Faiz, FS20230624/ **excerpt 8.3.0.008**)

Mr. Faiz (excerpt 8.3.0.009) sentiment is shared by Mr. Kamarul who is a writer in Wau Animation. The feedback from storyboard team regarding the writer's work is commended instead of frowned upon. Both of them celebrate the explorative working culture in Wau Animation.

Exactly. We play around with that. So, yes, it's full-on writing, everything during that time. But sometimes, there are storyboard artists who explore on their own, especially in action scenes. The writers might say, "A to B, C," but sometimes their execution of "A to B" is different. I enjoy it every time; after I write, I expect it to turn out a certain way, but my storyboard artist, my team, surprises me, going totally beyond my expectations. (Kamarul, KA20230605/ **excerpt 8.3.0.008**)

The animation team also will try their best to embody the characters so that they can produce the best scene for *Ejen Ali*. Additionally, for those that deal with asset, a digital library containing various forms of assets is utilized so that many animation instances particularly involving characters can be reused.

The director will be responsible for ensuring everything is coherent. We (the animation team) also have our own library, like, we create it ourselves. Oh, for example, Ali, when Ali is angry, his face is like this. When Alisya is angry, her face is like this. ...We're the ones who animate it. So, it is heavily important for us to understand the character ourselves, like how they get angry, how they sulk. Sometimes we're like actors… An actor should embody that character, he or she will try to understand how the character is like, you know, to be able to act out that thing. So, it's the same with animators. So, animators, in my opinion, for the most part, they're the closest to the character because they're the ones who animate that character. (Hafsa, HM20230317/ **excerpt 8.3.0.009**)

The flexibility and openness in work culture, in terms of creative expression, is also appreciated by members of the production team. The explorative nature of storytelling in Wau Animation seems to motivate staff members as their work often time is interesting with various artistic possibilities.

> The reason it's not boring is because Wau is open to exploration. We've drawn in various styles, and next week we might decide to try a different style for a new character or change the way Ali fights…Exploring things like that is interesting to me. (Faiz, FS20230624/ **8.3.0.010**)

Personnel like Ms. Dania, who is production supervisor adopted collaborative and democratic leadership style to ensure animation production process can run smoothly. Strictness can hinder creative expression which would cost the animation department. She attributed the openness leadership of Wau Animation toward fostering organizational creativity and teamwork.

> I don't believe in being too strict. If we approach animation with strictness, it doesn't work well because everyone in the animation industry is creative. If we approach them with strictness, it doesn't fit. It's more suitable to communicate, try to discuss, find a middle ground for a solution that balances what they want with what I want. For example, if there's a deadline next week, and some work is not yet complete, we sit down together and figure out how to follow up, maybe splitting the work or seeking help from other departments. That's how I approach it—softly, trying to discuss and find solutions together. I believe that's more suitable. (Dania, DM20230330/ **8.3.0.011**)

The work culture at Wau Animation is quite open and cheerful. We often

share pictures of our staff on Facebook. It's a culture of openness and

collaboration. We maintain a positive environment, both in the office and

online, to foster creativity and teamwork. It's essential to have a supportive

and vibrant atmosphere, and Wau Animation strives to create that culture.

In terms of work culture, it feels like working with friends. There's no

sense of difference. It's like we're working with friends, even with

directors. Of course, there's respect, but when we collaborate, it feels

comfortable. There's no hesitation, and communication is easy. When

there's an issue, it's easy to express and discuss, like working with close

friends. (Dania, DM20230330/ **excerpt 8.3.0.012**)

For merchandise items, the relationship to the licensees especially in terms of

narrative development and worldbuilding is strict and clear in that the licensees can only

portrayed *Ejen Ali* IP in varying product lines as approved by Wau Animation. Therefore,

merchandise licensees cannot expand *Ejen Ali* narrative in any form.

Like with Ali, for example. His image can't be flipped because if it flips,

his hair will be upside down. So, when it's upside down, he'll look

awkward, so we have to set guidelines for how his hair and color should

be, how the arrangement should be, how to place the logo, things like that,

so all the guidelines have to be in place. But of course, I think it depends

on the licensees' capability too in execution because not all licensees are

equal. There are companies that are stronger and have better quality in

their product design and things like that. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/

excerpt 8.3.0.012)

But at the same time, a very established company like AirAsia, for example, will naturally have very nice outcomes, but there are also things like what we do, simple things like biscuits, I can't remember the company's name, there are biscuits and simple toys. So maybe their quality is different. We can't compare them with more established brands because they have their own market. They are more urban, with a crowd that has higher purchasing power. But there are also those who go directly to the masses. (Usamah Zaid, UY20230726/ **excerpt 8.3.0.012 - continued**)

Yes, of course. Everything, like any merchandise that an external party wants to do, everything must come through Wau, and before it's released, we give guidelines and a style guide. We say, "Okay, if you want to do it, you can do it like this." Hmm, you can't do another design. It's like that. So, it definitely comes from Wau. (Farhan, AF20230408/ **excerpt 8.3.0.013**)

In contrast to the more centralized authorial authority exemplified by the Wachowskis, as analysed by Jenkins (2006), the relationship between Wau Animation and other authors exhibits a degree of flexibility. Within Wau Animation's production pipeline, led by its five directors, authors involved in the development of *Ejen Ali* content are afforded a certain level of autonomy to tailor their iterations to the specific requirements of their respective media formats. For instance, while the comic department operates independently of the animation production pipeline, it remains subject to the overarching authority of Wau Animation. Similarly, Mr. Kamarul, entrusted with spearheading the development of the Trading Card Game (TCG), operates within the framework of Wau Animation as a staff member, with major decisions subject to approval

by the directors. Both the comic department and TCG development fall under the purview of Mr. Fuad, one of the five directors, who serves as the chief brand officer.

The relationship between Media Prima Digital (MPD) and Rev Media Group (RMG) with Wau Animation follows a slightly different trajectory due to the former's status as subsidiaries of Media Prima Bhd. Wau Animation does not exert direct managerial authority over MPD and RMG; instead, they operate with a degree of autonomy granted by Media Prima Bhd, which co-owns the *Ejen Ali* IP. However, when it comes to the narrative development and worldbuilding of *Ejen Ali*, Wau Animation maintains its authority by ensuring continuity in the mobile games developed by MPD, as detailed in Section 7.1.3. This decentralized approach to authorship within the *Ejen Ali* ecosystem allows for greater creative freedom among contributors while ensuring overarching consistency and continuity in the franchise's narrative and worldbuilding. While certain divisions operate semi-autonomously, the influence of Wau Animation's directorial team remains crucial in steering the overall direction and coherence of the franchise's creative endeavours across various media platforms.

In conclusion, the involvement of numerous authors in the creation of transmedia narratives like *Ejen Ali* is not only common but also essential for the richness and depth of the storytelling experience. Wau Animation adopts an exploratory approach to narrative development and worldbuilding, allowing various authors the freedom to express their creativity while maintaining the continuity of the *Ejen Ali* franchise. Moreover, the implementation of an open-door policy fosters a collaborative environment where personnel across the production pipeline are encouraged to contribute feedback and ideas, leading to heightened motivation and a commitment to excellence in their work. This inclusive approach also cultivates a flexible work culture that nurtures creative expression.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

This study has provided an in-depth examination of the *Ejen Ali* franchise through the lens of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding within the Malaysian animation industry. By employing a qualitative case study method, it explored how Wau Animation expands the *Ejen Ali* narrative across various media formats, thereby enriching the storyworld and engaging a diverse audience. The research objectives are threefold: to investigate the adoption of multiple media formats for franchise expansion, to examine the worldbuilding elements within *Ejen Ali*, and to analyse the production strategies underpinning its transmedia narrative.

Discussion in chapter 5 and chapter 6 of this thesis have include extensive reviews on several works within *Ejen Ali* franchise involving varying media format. Through a detailed analysis of the franchise's television series, films, comics, and mobile games, this study has demonstrated how *Ejen Ali* leverages worldbuilding to create an immersive and interconnected story experience. Each medium contributes uniquely to the narrative, enhancing fan engagement and providing multiple entry points into the *Ejen Ali* universe. To some extent, both chapters have satisfied the first objective of this thesis by including descriptions of various *Ejen Ali* installments across multiple media formats. Additionally, the argument regarding the use of worldbuilding to expand the *Ejen Ali* franchise, while showcasing immersion and cohesiveness among the different installments, addresses the second objective of this study.

My argument on the versatility of worldbuilding to enhance transmedia component's value beyond its core utility of expanding a fictional universe evident in the formulation of *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia narrative serves to contribute to the current scholarship on worldbuilding theory in context of transmedia storytelling. In the case of *Ejen Ali*, worldbuilding provide space for narrative progression from one instalment to another. This is shown through the instalments of television series and film instalments

aided with parts of comic instalments. Both animation-based instalments offered visually driven storytelling, offering engaging spectacles that draw audiences into the *Ejen Ali*'s narrative. Their interconnected and intertwined plots foster a deeper reading experience, inviting viewers to delve deeper into the story. The *Ejen Ali* comic series, through its various applications, plays a pivotal role in the transmedia storytelling tapestry of the franchise. It encapsulates worldbuilding elements and supplementary narratives through *Sidemission*, and *M.A.T.A. Secret Files*. These additions not only enhance fan engagement but also immerse readers within the expansive *Ejen Ali* storyworld, positioning them as active contributors in worldbuilding efforts.

Furthermore, the utility of worldbuilding in the case of *Ejen Ali* goes beyond fostering narrative progression. It also serves to amplify the immersive experience for fans. Although they are not considered as mother ship by the standard on Ryan (2017), the mobile games seamlessly integrating characters, locales, lore, technologies, and environments, forge a profound connection between users and the *Ejen Ali* storyworld. Fans are not mere spectators but active participants, engaging with the storyworld through gameplay. For *Ejen Ali: Agents' Arena*, the absence of plots and storylines to accommodate the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game format showcases that worldbuilding is not always coupled with narrative progression in transmedia storytelling. The fact that the concept of a battle arena was first introduced as a game (without any purpose in the main *Ejen Ali* narrative) before being incorporated into season 3 of the *Ejen Ali* TV series suggests that worldbuilding can assert its function independently, rather than merely supporting multi-platformed narrative development. The utilization of worldbuilding to enhance cultural elements in the franchise also demonstrates the versatility of employing worldbuilding evident in *Ejen Ali* franchise, a facet not often emphasized in academic research.

The analysis resulting from engagement with the production team addresses the third research objective by illuminating the strategies used in developing the *Ejen Ali* transmedia narrative. Through the incorporation of in-depth interviews into the data collection process to investigate *Ejen Ali* as a transmedia storytelling phenomenon, this research highlights its significance in expanding scholarship on transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding. Examining *Ejen Ali* through authorial worldbuilding analysis enables this research to incorporate the authors' perspectives and experiences in developing transmedia content, thus broadening transmedia research beyond the examination of narrative construction and its media forms. Comparing current articulations on transmedia and worldbuilding theory with practical implementations also showcases this research's capacity to critique current theory and showcase the versatility of approaching the transmedia strategy for expanding a narrative franchise.

The study identifies two main strategies employed by the production team which are exploratory approach to worldbuilding and collaborative authorship model. The arguments on the exploratory nature of worldbuilding implemented by the production team, as well as the authorship structure revolving around the *Ejen Ali* franchise, are expected to contribute to scholarly understanding of worldbuilding strategy. It is illustrated that the exploratory approach enables Wau Animation to be flexible in their storytelling, allowing for adaptability and responsiveness to audience feedback. This approach is characterized by a bottom-up production strategy, reactivity to feedback and opportunities, and a commitment to continuity, which collectively ensure that the various components of the *Ejen Ali* franchise remain cohesive and compelling.

The second strategy, collaborative authorship, involves a symbiotic partnership between Wau Animation and Primeworks Studio (as well as Media Prima Berhad). Wau Animation brings expertise in crafting top-tier animation content, while Primeworks Studio provides the extensive resources necessary to propel the franchise to new heights

of success. This collaboration exemplifies the power of synergy in the entertainment industry, where the fusion of creative talent and robust support infrastructure drives the success of the *Ejen Ali* franchise.

Beyond the business dynamics, the collaborative efforts in narrative development and worldbuilding are equally crucial. Financial backing plays a pivotal role, but the cohesion and ingenuity in shaping the narrative arc and expanding the fictional universe of *Ejen Ali* are vital components of its journey toward prominence. The concept of authorship within the *Ejen Ali* franchise encompasses not only the creative input from individuals directly involved in the production process but also the collective contributions of a diverse array of talents and perspectives. This collaborative ethos infuses the franchise with dynamism and vitality, ensuring its enduring appeal to audiences across diverse demographics.

The circle of authorship in *Ejen Ali* includes Wau Animation's internal production pipelines for animation and the comic department, as well as the creative input of key individuals. External contributors, primarily Media Prima Digital and Rev Media Group, take the helm in crafting the mobile game instalments, thus expanding the collaborative network beyond the studio. Additionally, various undisclosed companies are selected by Wau Animation as licensees, granted permission to develop lines of merchandise using the *Ejen Ali* IP. This strategic alliance not only diversifies revenue streams but also extends the franchise's reach into new consumer markets, solidifying its presence in the broader cultural landscape.

The involvement of numerous authors in the creation of transmedia narratives like *Ejen Ali* is not only common but also essential for the richness and depth of the storytelling experience. Wau Animation adopts an exploratory approach to narrative development and worldbuilding, allowing various authors the freedom to express their creativity while maintaining the continuity of the *Ejen Ali* franchise. Moreover, the

implementation of an open-door policy fosters a collaborative environment where personnel across the production pipeline are encouraged to contribute feedback and ideas, leading to heightened motivation and a commitment to excellence in their work. This inclusive approach cultivates a flexible work culture that nurtures creative expression. While the director oversees the cohesiveness of the storytelling, staff members play a crucial role in maintaining checks and balances within and across departments, ensuring the integrity of the narrative while promoting a dynamic and collaborative creative process.

In concluding this thesis, I want to emphasize that the *Ejen Ali* franchise exemplifies the power of transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding in creating compelling, immersive narratives that resonate with audiences. By effectively integrating multiple media platforms and embracing collaborative authorship, Wau Animation has established *Ejen Ali* as a dynamic and enduring franchise within the Malaysian animation landscape. This study underscores the potential of transmedia strategies in expanding narrative universes and maintaining cohesiveness among various intertwining work, providing valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners in the field. Through its innovative approaches and collaborative efforts, the *Ejen Ali* franchise continues to expand offering immersive entertainment experience to its fan.

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