

# Short Essays



# Webtoon-Based Global Transmedia Storytelling

## *Bloodhounds*

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### Abstract

This article examines webtoon-based transnational transmedia by mapping out the ways in which webtoons become big-screen culture as a new trend in the Korean Wave phenomenon. With a case study of *Bloodhounds* (2023), which is one of the successful webtoon-based Netflix originals, it attempts to examine the major characteristics of webtoons turned into big-screen culture and the implications of webtoon-based transnational, transmedia storytelling. In so doing, it discusses a new cultural phenomenon in the global cultural sphere, which will shed light on our current debates on non-Western-based transmedia storytelling.

**Keywords:** Bloodhounds, transmedia storytelling, webtoon, OTT platform, Netflix

### Introduction

Over the past two decades, Korea has uniquely developed local transmedia storytelling due in large part to the rapid growth of webtoons. As a new form of media and cultural content, webtoons—manhwa that people enjoy on smartphones and other mobile gadgets—have rapidly become one of the mainstream cultural forms of youth since the mid-2000s. Because of their visual images, vertical layout, unique ideas, and diverse subjects and themes,

many people enjoy a variety of webtoons. These webtoons have also become primary sources for big-screen culture, such as films, dramas, digital games, and animations. Global over-the-top (OTT) platforms have especially paid attention to webtoons as crucial sources to be adapted to big-screen culture. Korean webtoons have become important sources of transmedia storytelling in the early twenty-first century, a key feature of which is the spreading of a narrative across platforms.<sup>1</sup>

Transmedia storytelling “is the art of world making” because it emerged in response to “media convergence—one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities.”<sup>2</sup> Transmedia storytelling “represents a process of communicating integral parts of a narrative across multiple delivery channels.”<sup>3</sup> One key characteristic of transmedia storytelling is stories that are told across various media platforms. As Ram points out, “Transmedia storytelling is the technique of telling a single story across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies.”<sup>4</sup> These scholars share a belief in transmedia storytelling’s close link to media convergence, referring to the flow of cultural products across multiple media outlets.<sup>5</sup>

This article examines webtoon-based transnational transmedia by mapping out the ways in which webtoons become big-screen culture as a new trend in the Korean Wave phenomenon. With a case study of *Bloodhounds*

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1. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York University Press, 2013).
  2. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006).
  3. Joseph Buehring and Nalaka Vittachi, “Transmedia Storytelling: Addressing Futures Communication Challenges with Video Animation,” *Journal of Future Studies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 65–78.
  4. Ajith Ram, “Asia to Be a Major Player in Transmedia Content,” November 8, 2016, Digital News Media, <https://www.digitalnewsasia.com/personal-tech/asia-be-major-player-transmedia-content>.
  5. Joo Yoon Pyo, Min Jang, and Tae Jun Yoon, “Dynamics Between Agents in the New Webtoon Ecosystem in Korea: Responses to Waves of Transmedia and Transnationalism,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2161–78.

(2023), which is one of the successful webtoon-based Netflix originals, it attempts to examine the major characteristics of webtoons turned into big-screen culture and the implications of webtoon-based transnational transmedia storytelling. In so doing, it discusses a new cultural phenomenon in the global cultural sphere, which will shed light on our current debates on non-Western-based transmedia storytelling.

### Webtoon-Based Transmedia Storytelling: *Bloodhounds*

Netflix has developed webtoon-based transmedia storytelling, and *Bloodhounds* (2023) is one of the latest webtoon-based adaptations. The eight-part action series, directed by Kim Joo-hwan, was based on the webtoon developed by Jung Chan titled *Sanyanggaedeul*. This webtoon was posted on Naver Webtoon between May 2019 and December 2020. The Netflix series *Bloodhounds* takes audiences back to this dark period—the height of COVID lockdowns. *Bloodhounds* ranked second on Netflix’s TV show chart within a week of its June 2023 debut. *Bloodhounds* rose to number 2 on Netflix, only behind the US series *Never Have I Ever*.<sup>6</sup>

When a webtoon is remade into a drama, the drama can differ from its source text due to a few main pressures, such as universalizing the theme, complications of real-life events (e.g., COVID and DUI incidents), and circulation values (cultural values), emphasizing entertainment, thus outweighing representational value (cultural understanding).<sup>7</sup> To begin with, as a major storyline, *Bloodhounds* deals with an illegal moneylending business, which has been one of the most serious socioeconomic evils in Korean

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6. Ji Eun Park and Tae Gyu Kim, “Korean Drama ‘Bloodhounds’ Is 2nd Most Popular on Netflix Global,” UPI, June 13, 2023, [https://www.upi.com/Entertainment\\_News/TV/2023/06/13/Netflix-chart-Bloodhounds-Korean-TV-series/2831686670042/](https://www.upi.com/Entertainment_News/TV/2023/06/13/Netflix-chart-Bloodhounds-Korean-TV-series/2831686670042/).

7. Ming Ming Nan, “Squid Game: The Hall of Screens in the Age of Platform Cosmopolitanism,” *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 3, no. 1 (2023): 7.

society because loan sharks target small business owners and individuals who desperately need money in a hurry and charge them extremely high interest rates, easily higher than 30 to 40 percent. During the COVID-19 lockdown, many small business owners and individuals who were fired from companies sought private loans because their credit was not good enough to borrow money from regular financial systems. Since they could not pay back borrowed money in a timely manner because of unfair terms, including high interest rates, they lost their houses and stores in many cases.

More specifically, set in Seoul, Korea, this series follows two young amateur boxers, Gun-woo (Woo Do-hwan) and Woo-jin (Lee Sang-yi), who first meet in the ring when they square off in the finals of a national tournament. Gun-woo “is disciplined and fundamentally sound, an extension of his sincere and principled nature” while “Woo-jin is flashy and unorthodox, an expression of his brash and outgoing personality.”<sup>8</sup> The two young protagonists get mired in the moneylending business but “defy and frustrate the rich and powerful preying on the weak. Two boxers take advantage of their fighting skills to help protect people from vile loan sharks,” and one female protagonist has been trained by her supporter to work as a money chaser, known as a bloodhound.<sup>9</sup> In the series, the former loan shark Choe, who trained the female loan shark, hired the two boxers to protect Hyun Ju (played by Kim Sae-ron).

The bloodhound is considered someone who is cold-blooded and does not show any pity or emotion to follow people who borrow money and then hide without repaying the loan. These bloodhounds are tenaciously chasing the runners to force them to return the money, both principal and interest. However, in the series, two of them, both boxers, are not working in the traditional meaning of bloodhounds. They help people from vile loan sharks, risking their lives against a huge evil force. They band together with

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8. Hanan Junaini, “‘Bloodhounds’ Review: Turn Off Your Brain and Enjoy the Thrilling Action Scenes,” MNE, June 8, 2023, <https://www.nme.com/reviews/tv-reviews/bloodhounds-review-kdrama-3452955>.

9. Park and Kim, “Korean Drama ‘Bloodhounds’ Is 2nd Most Popular on Netflix Global.”

the benevolent moneylender Choe, who was a former loan shark himself, to take down a ruthless loan shark who preys on the financially desperate.

While the series adapts the basic narrative from the webtoon, it expands the original storyline to adjust it to big-screen culture. Transmedia storytelling is not a simple copy of the original narrative but the expansion of the stories. Transmedia storytelling is “a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.).”<sup>10</sup> *Bloodhounds* utilizes the expansion of original narratives to fit into drama-style cultural content.

The adaptation process of *Bloodhounds* is unique. In numerous webtoon-based Netflix originals, cultural creators have attempted to develop big-screen culture based on webtoons because they envision the plot based on webtoon stories. The director of *Bloodhounds* has changed the plot due to the complications of real-life events—in this case, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the webtoon was published between May 2019 and December 2020, it was read by the readers during the peak point of COVID-19. Director Kim planned to combine the private banking and loan shark issues, which were already common before the pandemic era in Korea and COVID-19. During his interview with a news outlet, Kim states; “Everybody was affected by the pandemic, and some of them suffered. I tried to show their pain and the process of overcoming obstacles to connect viewers across the world.”<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the original webtoon, the series portrays the dire situation of both small and big businesses. Gun-woo’s mother, who owns a small restaurant, had to borrow money from a private bank; however, the series added the big businesses’ difficulties as well, which was not in the webtoon. The

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10. C. Scolari, “Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production,” *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 586–606.

11. “Director of Netflix Series ‘Bloodhounds’ Unveils Grim Reality Amid Pandemic,” *Korea Times*, June 13, 2023, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/02/398\\_352881.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/02/398_352881.html).

director of the series planned to explain how COVID-19 influenced all businesses' financial situations that asked them to rely on the private loan system, which exacerbated their situations. Director Kim thought, "I think it would be more sympathetic if the story was developed against the backdrop of the reality of the pandemic on top of the strengths of the original."<sup>12</sup> The director seemed to portray the close relationships between big business, the government, the police station, and now mega loan sharks as typical vicious connections in Korea during the pandemic era.

The series was also unexpectedly influenced by an accident in which cast member Kim Sae-ron, the female lead, caused a car accident while driving under the influence in May 2022 when filming was still underway. After the accident, the director cut some scenes involving Kim Sae-ron who teams up with the two boxers to fight against villains in the first six episodes. He had to revise the last two episodes to remove her character while adding a new female protagonist, a former archer. This external element unexpectedly twisted the adaptation process and consequently resulted in some differences between the webtoon and the series. Episodes 7 and 8 emphasized the bromance between Gun-woo and Woo-jin, because Hyun-ju was not able to appear in the series. While it is not intentional, shifting working environments in cultural production has become an important element in the process of adaptation. As COVID-19 has influenced the adaptation of the webtoon version into the drama, the DUI incident, as one of the significant real-life events, influenced the transmedia process.

The characteristics of the protagonists are also very different due to the series' emphasis on social justice, which became one of the primary themes during the adaptation process. In the webtoon, the two boxers were high school judo players. Gun-woo won the gold medal at the national championships while Woo-jin lost the medal due to Gun-woo. Woo-jin dropped out of the school and became a gang member to bully students. In that way,

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12. Eun Ji Lee, "Bloodhounds Trivia," *Korean Movie Today*, July 2023, <http://magazine.kofic.or.kr/contents/202307/Critic/Trivia.do>.



Woo-jin became a bit of a baby loan shark. However, in the Netflix series, they are sincere boxers who do not beat and bully people for no reason but use their boxing skills to fulfill justice. Social justice has been one of contemporary society's most significant universal themes. In order to appeal to global audiences, the series has transformed the original story into a rather simple plot, focusing on the theme of social justice, based on their sportsmanship. What they use are their fists and boxing skills, because they claim to be boxers, not gang members.

Another major difference is the role of President Choe, who is so powerful as to control the country with money from the underworld. He was a former loan shark who made a fortune, but he turned into a good man to help the poor and underprivileged. He lost his leg due to his opponent Kim Myeong-gil, who is the CEO of the credit bank developed from a private loan company but who is nothing but a loan shark. In the series, Choe is a philanthropist, paraplegic billionaire who moderates the guilt of being a former loan shark tycoon by giving out interest-free loans to the less fortunate, although he still chases and hunts down bad borrowers. Gun-woo and Woo-jin meet Choe at a small bookstore, which is a secret safe place to hide money; however, in the webtoon, they have their first meeting at the Catholic Church. Unlike his character as a benevolent person in the series, Choe has been a loan shark, although he has turned into a better person. Therefore, he wears Catholic vestments to disguise his identity and signal that he has become a good person.

Last but not least, there is a different direction in the series. In the final episode, the protagonists and a chaebol's son work together to defeat Kim Myeong-gil and find his hidden gold bars. The son (played by Choi Si-won), seemingly a typical bad guy because of his family origins, eventually decides to donate the gold bars to help the poor. Unlike US television programs, Korean stories portray not only ordinary people's struggles and desire to overcome them but also their hopes for social justice, a globally acceptable universality. *Bloodhounds* depicting the story of two young men caught up in the world of loan sharking fulfills social justice, combatting scenarios in

which money is more important than human life. As one of the most significant reasons for the popularity of Korean stories is the portrayal of themes of social injustice, inequality, and social exclusion,<sup>13</sup> the series shifts its original theme and emphasizes these issues.

Transmedia storytelling must be understood not only as the similar flow of story from the original text to numerous platforms but also as the expansion or compression of the original story to fit into platforms' unique attributes.<sup>14</sup> Transmedia storytelling involves various dimensions, including text, characters, and visual images.<sup>15</sup> Transmedia is not simply retelling the same story through a different medium. Nor is it just franchising, involving sequel after sequel. The core of transmedia storytelling is the interactive story world, which is the process of the expansion of original stories beyond one medium to various platforms.<sup>16</sup> This blurs the boundaries between creator and audience, as well as narrative and nonnarrative.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, it is essential for cultural creators to consider the audiences in the adaptation process. On the one hand, the audiences don't want to see the massive transformation of the original work during the transmedia process. On the other hand, they want to find the differences that reflect universal themes, real-life events, and circulation values that differentiate

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13. D.Y. Jin, "Transnational Proximity of the Korean Wave in the Global Cultural Sphere," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 9–28.

14. Dal Yong Jin, "Transmedia Storytelling in the Age of Digital Media: East Asian Perspectives-Introduction," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2085–93.

15. Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Sho Shige, "Yōkai Monsters at Large: Mizuki Shigeru's Manga, Transmedia Practices, and (Lack of) Cultural Politics," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019).

16. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Kyung Soo Park, "A Study on Webtoon Transmedia Storytelling Strategy," *Korean Journal of Animation* 12, no. 3 (2016): 97–117.

17. Karen Swallow Prior, "The New, Old Way to Tell Stories: With Input from the Audience," *Atlantic*, October 18, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/10/the-new-old-way-to-tell-stories-with-input-from-the-audience/280682/>.

the drama version from the webtoon version. As Tak<sup>18</sup> points out, “The audience may become confused” because they cannot see “the originally intended message of the narrative” in adapted cultural content—here, a webtoon-based Netflix original. However, this adaptation process causes the audience “to look even more acutely into the cross-media, leading to further immersion into the vast multitude of media. Also, as every platform has its own nuances, power relations, audience requirements, and dynamics, an alteration of the original text and its meanings occurs as it is redefined for launch over a different platform.”<sup>19</sup> Global OTT platforms attempt to provide the audience with cultural content that “is meant to be consumed as a distraction, whether it be for entertainment or socialization purposes” that is “marked by accessibility, flexibility, and seemingly endless choices.”<sup>20</sup>

Korean webtoons have become a powerful force as webtoons deliver values and traditions embedded in Korean society but also portray global universalities. Webtoons develop their unique roles as sources for big-screen culture “through advanced technology, mature storytelling techniques and sophisticated visual styles.”<sup>21</sup> As Nan aptly puts it, “The writers and directors can incorporate appropriate context without deviating too much from the intended story through smarter and subtler means, such as offhand conversations between minor characters, news broadcasts playing in the background, and indirect references from specific props carried by the characters (newspapers, books, posters, etc.)”<sup>22</sup>

Global OTT platforms intend to access Korean webtoons in the local context, which is also applicable in the global cultural scene. The creator of *Bloodhounds* develops a new artistic moment in that he greatly expands the

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18. Min Ae Tak, “Transmedia Storytelling: The Dispersion of Meaning in Film Franchises,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2022): 1–17.

19. Tak, “Transmedia Storytelling,” 11.

20. Nan, “Squid Game.”

21. Ae Gyung Shim, Brian Yecies, Xiaoling Ren, and Ding Wang, “Cultural Intermediation and the Basis of Trust Among Webtoon and Webnovel Communities,” *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 6 (2020): 844–45.

22. Nan, “Squid Game.”

original narratives to fit into our contemporary capitalist society. Global OTT platforms are conscious of thematic issues. In order to appeal to global audiences, big-screen cultural creators have to transform the major themes. Instead of targeting local audiences who prefer local specificities to global agendas, their audiences are located in different countries, and the majority of them may not read the original webtoons. Cultural creators have to reflect on sociocultural events that global audiences sympathize with. Unlike the original webtoon, the director of the drama series decided to focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, which fundamentally influenced global people's economic environments. By transforming the original narrative based on real-life events, the adaptation of the original narrative can be more attractive to global audiences. The adaptation of non-Western-based webtoons into big-screen culture needs to deal with numerous unconventional factors. While many Western-based adaptations have focused on textual expansion and contraction,<sup>23</sup> webtoon-based adaptation emphasizes a variety of new media environments, such as the development of universal themes and the consideration of real-life events, which are applicable to both local and global cultural markets.

## Conclusion

This essay analyzes the growth of webtoon-based transmedia storytelling with the case of *Bloodhounds*. Many cultural creators pay attention to the adaptation of webtoons into big-screen materials, such as dramas, films, and games. Global OTT platforms recruit original stories based on webtoons that resonate with global audiences and ask local cultural creators to produce cultural programs for them. They understand and utilize the soaring

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23. Carlos A. Scolari, "Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production," *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 586–606; Carlos A. Scolari, "Lostology: Transmedia Storytelling and Expansion/Compression Strategies," *Semiotica* (2013): 1–24.

popularity of the Korean Wave; however, they believe in the values of webtoons as original sources as they portray universal values in themes and subjects. Webtoons' vivid visual portrayal of contemporary society that resonates with global audiences can be adaptable and transformable. As *Bloodhounds* exemplifies, global OTT platforms have attempted to adapt local webtoons to create big-screen cultural content. Through the transformation of a webtoon into a drama series based on various strategic considerations, such as the universalization of the theme, complications of real-life events, and the emphasis on circulation values, global OTTs have largely utilized transmedia storytelling in cultural production.

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