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BTS Universe: A Case Study on Transmedia Storytelling

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"Even if it's tiring and painful, I will fly if I can

Will you hold my hand

So that I won't be afraid anymore?

If you and I are together

I can smile"

A Supplementary Story: You Never Walk Alone – BTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

The present work proposes to analyze a paradigmatic case of transmedia storytelling in order to contribute to a more elaborate conceptualization of this type of narrative by bringing together theoretical considerations by scholars from different fields, such as narrative, (inter)media and fan studies. The object of study chosen for this research was the BTS Universe, a transmedia story created to provide a shared fictional background for some of the albums by kpop group BTS. Its storyworld is developed through music videos, short films, books, a Webtoon and a mobile app game, all of which had their own contributions to the narrative. The analysis aims to show how the construction of the storyworld takes place within the transmedia narrative and, thus, exemplify how the process proposed by Jenkins (2006) works; the concepts of mythos, ethos and topos proposed by Klastrup & Tosca (2014); Marie-Laure Ryan's theory about the storyworld, its expansion, and the platforms on which it happens; and Jason Mittell's (2014) concept of "What Is" and "What If?" extensions.

Keywords: transmedia storytelling, intermediality, narratology, kpop, BTS.

RESUMO

O presente trabalho propõe analisar um caso paradigmático de narrativa transmídia a fim de contribuir para uma a formação de um conceito mais elaborado deste tipo de narrativa, reunindo considerações teóricas de estudiosos de diferentes áreas, como estudos da narrativa, estudos de (inter)mídia e estudos de fãs. O objeto de estudo escolhido para esta pesquisa foi o *BTS Universe*, uma história transmídia criada para fornecer um *background* ficcional compartilhado para alguns dos álbuns do grupo de kpop BTS. Seu mundo da história é desenvolvido através de videoclipes de música, curtas-metragens, livros, um Webtoon e um jogo de aplicativo móvel, todos os quais com as suas próprias contribuições para a narrativa. A análise visa mostrar como se dá a construção do mundo da história dentro da narrativa transmídia e, assim, exemplificar como funciona o processo proposto por Jenkins (2006); os conceitos de mythos, ethos e topos propostos por Klastrup & Tosca (2014); a teoria de Marie-Laure Ryan sobre o mundo da história, sua expansão e as plataformas em que ela acontece; e o conceito de Jason Mittell (2014) de extensões "*What Is*" e "*What If?*".

Palavras-chave: narração transmídia, intermidialidade, narratologia, kpop, BTS.

LIST OF FIGURES

SUMMARY

1 INTRODUCTION

Intermediality is not a new age phenomenon. Many people would argue that intermedial works have emerged in recent times instigated by the development of technology, but they fail to consider older instances of it. Tales told verbally, acted out as a play and portrayed in church murals, paintings or even carvings can be examples of stories that have traveled through different media. In fact, as Marie-Laure Ryan says in "Narration in Various Media" (2014), "the founding fathers[1] of narratology recognized from the very beginning the medium-transcending nature of narrative" (RYAN, 2014, p. 4). Therefore, as demonstrated, intermedial approaches to both creation of art and its criticism have been around for as long as we can remember.

It is undeniable, however, that technological advancement has found a way to make it possible for more and more consumers[2] to interact with intermedial stories, with the diversity of the platforms in which one would consider telling them. It is very unlikely to imagine that a hundred years ago a writer would use a digital game to further develop their characters or a blog on the internet to give readers information not conveyed in the original book, but nowadays it would be entirely possible. On account of this, a big trend in research about the relation between media and narration has been the focus on "transmedia" or "transmedial" narration, where a certain story is developed across multiple media platforms.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins describes in his texts "Transmedia Storytelling 101" (2007) and "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling" (2009), posted on his blog titled Confessions of an Aca-Fan, his theory on what characterizes the transmedial narration. The author introduces the topic with this explanation:

> Transmedia storytelling represents 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. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (JENKINS, 2007).

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[1] "(…) according to Bremond (1973), stories can be realized in media as diverse as literature, stage, ballet, and film. Mixing genres (Hühn & Sommer → Narration in Poetry and Drama) and media, Barthes ([1966] 1977) expands the list to include myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic history, drama, mime, painting, stained glass window, cinema, comics, news items, conversation, etc." (RYAN, 2014, p. 4).

[2] I will refer to the people who absorb the content of a storyworld as "consumers" in this work because the terms "reader" or "audience" seem narrow with the varying nature of platforms used by the BTS Universe.

From the moment I first started paying deeper attention to the media I consumed, the matter of transmedial narration has piqued my interest. I have always found it intriguing, for example, when I would watch a movie and find out later that there is a book that accompanies it giving further insight on a specific element, or an album made especially to go with it composed of songs that refer to the events I have watched. There is something fascinating about seeing a story play out on so many different platforms that leaves you wondering about it for days on end. This led me to want to understand how the content released through each of these products comes together to create a storyworld that consumers can recognize as such, and help others to do the same.

Marie-Laure Ryan, one of our main scholars for this analysis, makes a consideration in her book named "Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology" (2014) about the importance of determining exactly what a specific definition, or a concept, encompasses:

> The disadvantage of a unified global definition is that the more phenomena the definition encompasses, the less useful it becomes as an analytical tool. Language is polysemic by nature, but while polysemy is good for poetry it is bad for science and for the discourse of the humanities. It is better to work with a large collection of sharp tools that fulfill precise tasks than with a single blunt one, even if everyone cannot share the tools. (RYAN, 2014, p. 27).

With that in mind, I decided to find a real-life example of transmedial narration to analyze so that the concept can become more well-defined, and write a case study aiming to exemplify the theoretical considerations about this type of narration. For this purpose, I chose to investigate the BTS Universe (henceforth BU), a storyworld produced by BigHit Entertainment[3] and composed of music videos, books, short films and stories, a game and a webtoon[4].

Along with being the best-selling artists in the world for two consecutive years in 2020 and 2021, BTS have built quite the legacy from the moment they made their debut in 2013 until now. Some examples include being elected Special Presidential Envoys for Future Generations and Culture by the South Korean government and giving speeches at their multiple appearances at the UN General Assembly, becoming Unicef ambassadors and coming up with the campaign "Love Myself" in support of

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[3] A South Korean entertainment company established in 2005 by Bang Sihyuk. It was rebranded as BigHit Music in 2021 and is now a subsidiary of Hybe Corporation.
[4] A Webtoon is a type of digital comic, animated cartoon or series of comic strips published online, originated in South Korea.

bullying victims, and bringing in 0.3% of South Korea's economy while being the reason why one in every thirteen tourists visited the country in 2017[5]. The group has also become an important bridge between South Korean culture and the rest of the world, and has motivated many people to even start learning the language, including me.

Music has always been one of my biggest passions, and seeing the way BTS care so much for what they do while writing, producing and performing made me pay more attention to them. That, together with the topics they bring in their songs such as growing up and mental health, which found me just at the right time, and all of their philanthropic, political, and cultural impact solidified my love for the group. However, what initially drew me into the ARMY, the BTS fandom, was the brilliant story they, and their company, have developed through transmedia storytelling.

The BU started with the release of the music video for BTS's hit song "I Need U" in 2015, being later developed through a webtoon called "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: Save Me"; two diary style books called "The Notes"; various short films that served as concepts and trailers for their albums, and the albums themselves; short stories posted in a blog focusing on a recurring element of the universe, the fictional Smeraldo flower; and more recently, a digital game. Each of these parts has a way to contribute to the overall experience of the storyworld. Therefore, the music videos and short films first introduce and develop the story, the books convey to consumers how each of the characters thinks and share information about events in the character's lives that hadn't been mentioned before. Additionally, the webtoon explains the rules of the storyworld and the digital game aims to further immerse the consumer into the story.

In order to achieve what I have proposed here, I will introduce, in chapter 2, the rationale chosen to shed light on the different aspects of transmedia narratives. I will further explain Henry Jenkins's definition of transmedia storytelling, as well as bring forth Klastrup & Tosca's ideas of what exactly is transmitted across media and Lars Elleström's proposition of how the transmission is recognized. I will then describe how a storyworld is built with Meir Sternberg's concept of exposition; Marie-Laure Ryan's theory about the platforms used to narrate and how the storyworld can be expanded;

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[5] Information available at: <https://nypost.com/2018/12/18/k-pop-band-bts-brings-3-6-billion-a-year-to-south-korea/>. Accessed in: 25 oct. 2022.

and Jason Mittell's characterization of the extensions used for the storytelling. Next, in chapter 3, I will analyze how each of the products tied to the BU contributed to the construction of the storyworld and the transmedia narrative, and connect their contributions to the considerations I want to demonstrate.

As the BU is an extensive story with many important details, I will also provide a chart informing the distribution of the story parts across different media and platforms. My aim here is to make sure every part of this fictional world is accounted for and organized in a way that is easy for me, the researcher, to refer to, as well as clear for readers who might not be familiar with the storyworld or every form of media it is available on.

It is common for transmediality researchers to focus on explaining *what* it is, but here the focus is on *how* it works. Such a universe being developed across so many different types of media contributes to the exemplification of what scholars point to in their theoretical - and at times abstract - considerations. And by examining the inner workings of a transmedia storyworld, literature and narrative researchers can have a clearer idea of what this concept encompasses and what has already been creatively explored with the technologies and media available so far.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A case study can be defined as a research method that takes a deeper look into one person, object or event to understand its characteristics, functionality and helps shed light on how it can be found in its real-life context. It allows a researcher to immerse themselves in their object of study, pick apart its most important features and use it to help others analyze other objects, predict possible results and, most importantly, understand concepts better. For this study I chose to explain the organization and development of the BTS Universe in order to make the concept of a transmedial storyworld clearer and exemplify what scholars have theorized about these worlds. However, for us to make an analysis it is imperative that we understand the definitions and theoretical propositions we plan to distinguish and characterize here.

2.1 Transmedia Storyworlds

Henry Jenkins is the first scholar that will come to any researcher's mind if they are thinking of Transmedial Narration since his considerations are some of the most well-known among scholars that study this phenomenon. His research is largely focused on media and communications, thinking of transmedial narration in terms of culture in the era of convergence and technology, community knowledge, and participatory and fan culture. Together with his aforementioned definition of transmedia storytelling as a process where consumers can find the important elements of a story distributed in different platforms and add them up to create an entertainment experience, he proposes in the third chapter of his book "Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide" that:

> A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the 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. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. (JENKINS, 2006, p. 96).

This means that, for Jenkins, every new product of a transmedial storyworld must have meaning within itself, must carry narrative value and must be able to serve as a way for a consumer to start their relationship with the story. This is the main reason why the scholar does not consider merchandising as a part of the storyworld, since a toy, for example, would not add to the narrative or be able to pull a person into the story, but only serve as a marketing tactic. It is also why he differentiates, in "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling" (2009), the terms adaptation and extension. According to Jenkins, the first is a piece of work that simply adapts an already existing story to another medium without changing too much of the original narrative, while the latter works as an extension of the universe, adding new elements and expanding our knowledge of it. He regards extensions as more valuable to the transmedial story, as his ideal form of it is composed of texts that make a contribution to the whole and not only adapt it.

As we can see, Jenkins's theory emphasizes the construction of a singular story. Klastrup and Tosca, however, focus on the characteristics of the abstract concept that is being transmitted through and throughout the different platforms. They name this concept "transmedial world" and explain their definition of it in their conference paper "Transmedial Worlds – Rethinking Cyberworld Design" (2004):

> Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterizes a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the "worldness" (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world's worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time. Quite often the world has a cult (fan) following across media as well. (KLASTRUP; TOSCA, 2004, p.1).

They also provide researchers with a framework for the analysis of what they call the transmedial world. According to the authors, these worlds exhibit three core features: the *mythos*, the *topos* and the *ethos*. The mythos is the "central knowledge one needs to have in order to interact with or interpret events in the world successfully" (2004, p. 4). It involves the elements which form the very basis of the story: the lore about the world being presented, who exists there, which conflicts there are, etc. The topos refers to the context in which the world is located: the time period it is set in and the places it shows consumers. Not rarely, later works related to a storyworld can be set in another time and other spaces so as to not tamper with the mythos, but the general conditions are mostly constant. Klastrup & Tosca (2004) remark that "knowing the topos is knowing what is to be expected from the physics of and navigation in the

world" (ibid., p. 4). And the ethos can be explained as a "form of knowledge required in order to know how to behave in the world" (ibid.). It points to the behavior that can be expected from characters as it shows consumers what "good" and "bad" actions look like in the world by specifying the explicit and implicit ethics of it.

Lars Elleström, another celebrated scholar in the field of intermedia studies, brings us the perspective of how the information is spread and recognized as different manifestations of a transmedia storyworld. He explains that, on occasion, we find meaning in the correspondence between different media because the content they portray is the same in certain respects and refers to this concept as transmediation, a "transfer of media characteristics" (2019, p. 5). Elleström, then, relates this to transmedia storytelling to describe why we can form an idea of "worldness" in his book "Transmedial Narration: Narratives and Stories in Different Media" (2019):

> Transmedia storytelling—narratives in different media types working together to form a larger whole—requires that narratives can be largely transmediated. It would not be possible to combine narratives from different media types to a larger whole if these narratives did not overlap. In effect, this means that one recognizes represented media characteristics in the different media as the same; thus, represented persons, environments, ideas, events, and their interrelations can interlock. (ELLESTRÖM, 2019, p. 6).

As demonstrated, each of these scholars has a slightly differently focused concept of transmedia storytelling, but they all agree on one thing: there has to be some type of consistency between the different works for consumers to be able to construct a storyworld. This can come in the form of characters, events, settings, or even specific elements that show up in most representations of the world. When these are identified and grouped together, they help us to form the "worldness" brought by Klastrup & Tosca and, consequently, construct the story Jenkins describes.

2.2 Building the Storyworld

Now, after understanding the concept of transmedia storytelling and how we recognize a storyworld as such, we may go further into the considerations that allow us to analyze these worlds. Meir Sternberg's concepts of exposition and expositional gaps provide us with a helpful lens for examining the BTS Universe as they allow us to consider how the storyworld was organized by the producers. He starts off his book "Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction" (1978) with an important definition of exposition as the elements of a work that present the characteristics of its

world to consumers and informs them of what to expect from the story. He mentions indispensable components that call to mind the same mythos, topos and ethos Klastrup & Tosca (2004) consider to establish the transmedial world:

> (...)the time and place of the action; of the nature of the fictive world peculiar to the work or, in other words, of the canons of probability operating in it; of the history, appearance, traits and habitual behavior of the dramatis personae; and of the relations between them. (STERNBERG, 1978, p.1)

The scholar also explains advantages and disadvantages in the way exposition is arranged throughout the works, mentioning the importance of leaving expositional gaps so that consumers form hypotheses and want to see the story through to figure out whether they were right or not. These expositional gaps refer to the elements of exposition that are not revealed immediately, creating questions that might be answered in the text, such as who the killer is in most detective novels, which he classifies as a temporary gap; and questions that might not be explicitly answered in the text, the permanent gaps.

These concepts are interesting for this analysis in the sense that they will help us understand how BigHit first introduced consumers to the BTS Universe, with music videos jumping straight into the action of the story, leaving gaps that begged to be filled out and resolved, but still establishing the storyworld that would be experienced through the works. Additionally, they will help us explain how some of the products, such as The Notes 1 and 2, work to expand the mythos, ethos and topos of the world by filling out these gaps and providing exposition focused on the aforementioned indispensable components.

Sternberg also brings a consideration that helps us think about how the consumer interprets a story, and how the exposition they use to make sense of the storyworld is not always concentrated in one specific work, as is the case of the BU.:

> Many critics work on the implicit (and sometimes even explicit) assumption that in all these cases at least part of the expositional antecedents may indeed be taken as known or obtained by the reader outside of the limits of the single work, particularly in reference to different stories of the same cycle, which they regard as a single unit. (STERNBERG, 1978, p. 2)

Thus, consumers can consider many stories as a single unit, a storyworld, and use exposition from other products to fill out gaps in the one they're consuming at that moment. This shows us how the interpretation of the story can also be made with content from other works.

Another important aspect of the organization of the BTS Universe is the platforms used to release content. Jenkins states in his explanation of a transmedial story that in his ideal form, each medium "does what it does best" in order to create the best entertainment experience possible. As Marie-Laure Ryan (2014, p. 1) puts it "the shape of the pipe affects the kind of information that can be transmitted", and each of these pipes seems to create a type of "language" of its own that cannot otherwise be, at least completely, adapted to another. In the same way that the consumers are able to see what the storyworld actually looks like through the music videos, or further analyze each moment as a still picture in the webtoon, the mental life of the characters portrayed in written narrative in The Notes could not have been represented as well in other mediums. By pointing out the way the content is distributed in each platform, we can understand which specific elements these can bring to the storyworld and how BigHit organized the development of the narration.

Ryan also raises the point that transmedia storytelling should carry the "inherent world-expanding capacity of transfictionality" (2017, p. 3), further explaining that three operations work as a basis for it: extensions, which expand the storyworld by telling new stories; modifications, which change what was already established by the story; and transpositions, which change time and place but keeps other elements. The operation considered the most popular in transmedia stories by Ryan is the extension, and she states that:

> The standard ways to expand a world are to stretch the story in length (= time) through sequels, prequels, and midquels, or to stretch it in breadth (= space) by telling the (back)story of new characters who are connected in some way to the old characters. (...) Yet another common device is to represent events from a different point of view. (RYAN, 2017, p. 6)

As a way to characterize the extensions and further examine the BTS Universe, we will use Jason Mittell's concepts of "What Is" and "What If" extensions. He explains that these are not to be regarded as categories but more as tendencies, and we will observe during our analysis of the chosen storyworld that they are not mutually exclusive as it is possible for both to be present in the same project. Mittell (2014) defines "What Is" transmedia as a way to make a canon contribution that expands the story by clarifying aspects of the plot and the storyline, and remarks that this model "encourages forensic fandom with the promise of eventual revelations once all the pieces are put together" (ibid., p. 273). Conversely, "What If" transmedia focuses on possibilities about specific elements, such as characters, but not necessarily makes

canonical contributions. He also states that its main objective is to take the story into "parallel dimensions, with connections foregrounding issues of tone, mood, character, or style" (ibid.), bringing hypotheses about events that could happen within the storyworld but that are not to be considered canon. One example of this we have in the BTS Universe is the digital game "BTS Universe Story", in which BigHit provides fans with a space where they can create any story they want using the characters and settings available.

The structure of the BTS Universe starts with a film (or a music video) that lacks information which will be provided by future extensions. Some of these extensions come to dive further into the characters, some come as sequels to continue the story, others come to answer questions about the functioning of the world, but they all work together to form a complete picture of the storyworld. However, there are also those that work only to further immerse consumers into the world. This creates a sort of primary transmedial system[6] in accordance with what Jenkins classifies as the "ideal model" and another satellite system that consists of mostly "What If" extensions, as defined by Jason Mittel. It is not imperative to consume every single product in order to enjoy the narrative, but it does make for a more meaningful and overall coherent experience. This type of structure is one of the aspects that make the BTS Universe so interesting to analyze, since it has so many different instances that we can verify considerations made by many scholars.

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[6] I use "system" here as a way to refer to the works themselves and not necessarily the storyworld they form, thus the choice of the new term.

3 THE BTS UNIVERSE

The BTS Universe is a fictional transmedial storyworld constituted by several music videos and short films; three books and several mini books; short stories; a Webtoon; a phone app game; an online blog; and a digital novel. It was envisioned and produced by BigHit Music to tell a story with fictional characters based on the members of the Kpop group BTS, a seven-member South Korean boy band that debuted under the company in 2013. The story serves as the concept and lore attached to some of the group's albums and ties into the overall themes they were looking to bring attention to at the time it was first released, such as the broader topics of the power of friendship, growing up and the changes that come to your life as you grow. As BTS grew, they also turned to other themes such as how important it is to forgive and love yourself, and to ask for help when you need it, which then became the most central message of the BU. This strategy is a staple of HYBE Labels, the conglomerate under which BigHit Music operates, as other groups under the same management have also inspired fictional storyworlds developed through music videos, webtoons and other products such as Tomorrow X Together's "THE STAR SEEKERS", Enhypen's "DARK MOON" and BTS's second story "7Fates: CHAKHO".

Consumers were first introduced to the BU in 2015 when the music video for BTS's hit single "I Need U" was released, followed by the short film that served as a comeback trailer "화양연화[7] on stage: prologue" and the music video for the song "Run". In these videos, they saw the BTS members Jin, Suga, J-Hope, RM, Jimin, V and Jungkook portray characters that carried their real names: Seokjin, Yoongi, Hoseok, Namjoon, Jimin, Taehyung and Jungkook respectively. The story kicks off with alternating scenes that show the contrast between the good times of the past and how the characters' lives have taken a turn to the worse now that they are separated. The main focus of the storyworld is the group, who all have their destinies intertwined when they are sent to school detention on the same day. As we find out in later products, when the music video starts, they have all gone their separate ways two years earlier and now have to deal with how their lives turned out.

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[7] 화양연화 in Korean and 花樣年華 in Chinese, breaking down each ideogram, they mean 花 / 화: flower; 樣 / 양: appearance; 年 / 연: year; and 華 / 화: blooming. It is a Chinese expression which roughly translates to "the age of blossom" or "flowery years" and is used to describe someone's youth, or their "blossoming years". In this context, BigHit translates it as "the most beautiful moment in life" and uses it as a concept phrase for the "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life" albums.

In 2016, videos for the Japanese versions of "I Need U" and "Run" were released, accompanied by a music video titled "EPILOGUE: Young Forever" as a way to close the era dedicated to the "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life" albums. After that, later in the year, seven short films were released as concept films and trailers for BTS's next album "Wings", which were followed by the music video for "Blood, Sweat and Tears". All of which expanding on the Bangtan Universe's story and being marked with the label "BU content certified by BigHit Entertainment", common to all works related to the storyworld.

The first book indicated to be a part of the BU was called "BTS WINGS CONCEPT BOOK" and was released in 2017, after the music video for the Japanese version of "Blood Sweat & Tears", containing information about the process of making up the concept for the album "Wings" and how it relates to the group's previous releases. As the book concluded the era dedicated to "Wings", a tweet by BigHit Entertainment brought the first ever mention of "The Notes" and its journal entry style of narration with the short story "花樣年華 The Notes: Seokjin - 13 June Year 22" as a teaser and opened the "Love Yourself" era. Three albums were released in total during 2017 and 2018, named "LOVE YOURSELF 承 'Her'", "LOVE YOURSELF 轉 'Tear'" and "LOVE YOURSELF 結 'Answer'" whose 4-version packaging included in total 12 mini books, one for each version of the albums, that would later add up to be released as the book "花樣年華 THE NOTES 1" in 2019.

As a teaser for the first album, along with Seokjin's June 13th journal entry, the short film "LOVE YOURSELF Highlight Reel '起承轉結'[8]" was released. For the second one, another short film and another short story came out in 2018 titled "'Euphoria : Theme of LOVE YOURSELF 起 Wonder'" and "花樣年華 The Notes: Jungkook - 22 May Year 22" respectively. These were followed by the music video for "Fake Love" where we can see a lot of visual references to the story later explained by the webtoon. As for the third, one more "花樣年華 The Notes" short story was tweeted by BigHit, now revealing the contents of Seokjin's 3 August Year 22 entry that was accompanied

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[8] 起承轉結: the ideograms together form a Chinese proverb that means "transition". Breaking down the ideograms, they mean 起: beginning; 承: after the beginning; 轉: changing; 結: conclusion. The four ideograms were used in respective order, one in each title of the four short films called LOVE YOURSELF Highlight Reel. The last video, "LOVE YOURSELF Highlight Reel '起承轉結" is a compilation of the earlier parts and brings to a conclusion the events told in this section of the story, which is the reason why its name is composed of all the ideograms.

by a music video titled "LOVE YOURSELF 結 Answer 'Epiphany'" which served as a comeback trailer for the last album in the "Love Yourself" era.

In the beginning of 2019, the products that clarified most of the story told through the BTS Universe were released, the Webtoon "花樣年華 Pt.0 <SAVE ME>" and the book "花樣年華 THE NOTES 1". The webtoon's chapters came out one each week from January 16th to April 10th, and on April 12th, BTS's new EP "MAP OF THE SOUL : PERSONA" with four more versions of The Notes mini books. Added to the four versions in the packaging of the album "MAP OF THE SOUL : 7" (2020) and other journal entries, these mini books make up the second, and last, book "花樣年華 THE NOTES 2".

The latest addition to the BU was a mobile app game named "BTS Universe Story" where fans could create their own stories using the characters they had been keeping up with since 2015. They could also play the visual novel "花樣年華 <I'M FINE>" produced by BigHit Entertainment to try to save each one of the members and have a role inside the original BU story. Other products related to the story include the Smeraldo Flower Shop blog posts, released in 2017 and updated in 2020, that we will further examine in the analysis section of this study; a graphic lyrics book titled "함께라면 웃을 수 있다 (We Can Laugh When We're Together)" (2020); and character posters (2018).

Figure 1 - BTS Universe Release Timeline
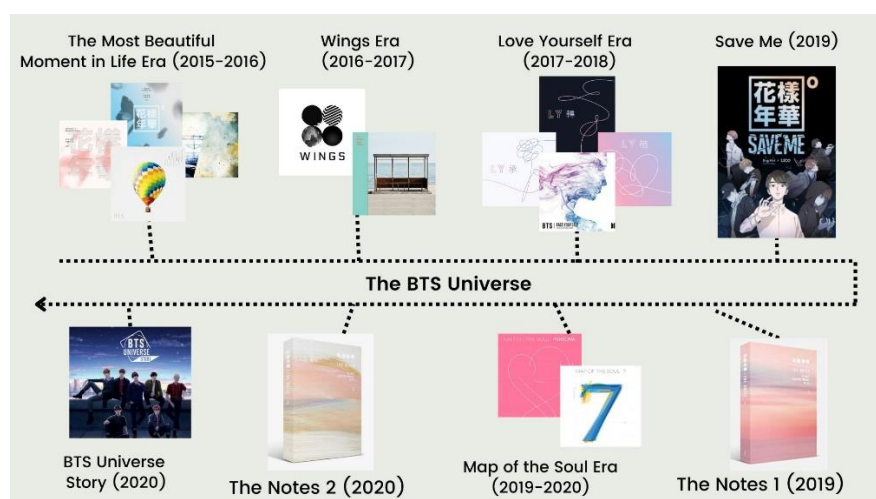
Source: Made by the author.

Since "花樣年華 Pt.0 <SAVE ME>" is one of the products with the fullest explanation there is about the events that happen in the BTS Universe, I will now

present an overview of its story. As was mentioned before, two years before the story in the webtoon begins, the main characters have gone their separate ways. When Seokjin returns to South Korea from the U.S., he reminisces on the good times they shared, but makes no effort to approach them when he sees them.

However, after having a nightmare involving them, he decides to try to reconnect with the group. He finds Namjoon in jail for a fight he had with a customer of the gas station he used to work at, and in the visit he is told that Yoongi and Jungkook are dead, that Hoseok is hospitalized and that Jimin and Taehyung have not been heard of for some time. As he is leaving the detention center, he notices a crowd of reporters harassing a man and is shocked to hear that they are all asking questions about why he would kill his father and what happened to his family. Seokjin then gets a closer look and finds out the man being arrested is Taehyung. Shocked to know what happened to his friends, he runs away from the place until he finds the beach where the group used to hang out and wonders how they ended up in this situation. Just as he thinks all is lost, a mysterious cat shows up at the beach and asks the man whether he would fix all their mistakes and save everyone if he got the chance, to which he answers, "I would do anything". We see the fabric of time cracking and dissolving, until Seokjin wakes up in the "next morning", only to find out that he is back to April 11th, the day he arrived in Songju, his hometown and where the story takes place.

At first Seokjin does not realize the situation he is in, but after reliving the same night twice because he has not changed his actions, he starts to understand what he has to do in order to save his friends. After many failed attempts, which are shown in many of the products, Seokjin then comes to the conclusion that he cannot fix everything by himself and that the group needs to help save each other instead.

This brings attention to some of the most central themes of the BTS Universe: the importance of friendship and camaraderie, as well as how going through the hardships of youth is a lot easier when one is able to ask for help and that it is okay to do so. This theme is referred to many times in the products that develop this storyworld and can be mentioned as one of the elements that build the consistency that is useful to the recognition of these events as belonging to one storyworld. I will now further analyze the extensions of the BTS Universe to explain how they organize the fictional world and, consequently, show an example of how a narration through transmediality functions.

3.1 Music Videos and Short Films (2015-2018)

As we have seen, the story of the BU kicked-off in the form of music videos for BTS's singles released in 2015. Since this first group of works is the beginning of it all, they work to establish our story, to introduce our characters and to show the first events, which we will later notice are some of the most important ones. For quite some time, they were the only depiction of the BTS Universe available to consumers, who were thrown straight into action with more gaps than expositional information to account for the events narrated in these first videos.

In narratological terms, they bring the first treatment of the *fabula*. As Meir Sternberg (1978) explains, the fabula can be considered the objective order of events, or "(...) the second-degree 'raw material' (postselected and straightforwardly combined narrative) that the artist compositionally "deforms" and thus re-contextualizes in constructing his work (...)." (ibid., p. 8). Most writers, or producers, present this material in an order which forms the *sujet*, "(...) the actual disposition and articulation of these narrative motifs in the particular finished product, as their order and interrelation, shaping and coloring, was finally decided on by the author." (ibid.). Consumers, on the other hand, logically (re)assemble these motifs into the fabula, and it is there that the inaugural exposition of Klastrup & Tosca's mythos, ethos and topos takes place.

The video for *I Need U* (2015) starts with shots of each member, as it sets the tone and the mood for what the audience is about to see. In the very first shot, Seokjin is sitting in his room, and one of the constant elements of the BU is introduced as he is holding six white lily petals. This flower is commonly associated with purity, but also growth, transformation and rebirth, which are some of the main overall themes of the storyworld. Flower petals make an appearance at least once in most BU works and operate as a recurring motif that helps us recognize these works as belonging to the same world no matter the style of representation, which Jenkins (2006) mentions as an important feature of a successful transmedia story.
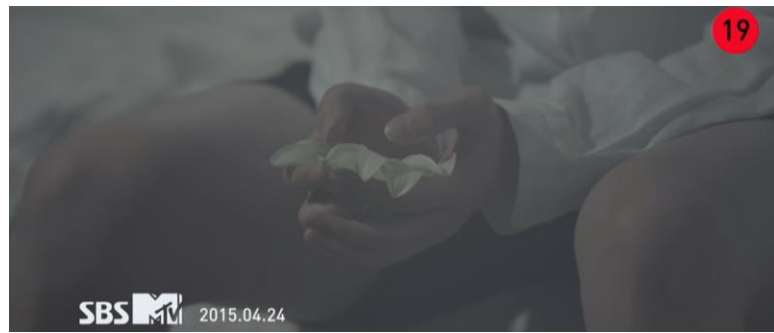
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) 'I NEED U' Official MV (Original ver.), 2015.

When the song starts, the scenes alternate between their solo storylines and the group's interactions. The group scenes show the good times the characters spent with each other – partying, hanging out, having fun. The solo scenes show how their lives take a turn to the worst when each one of them is alone. The climax of the music video is the moment Taehyung kills his father, which quickly alternates with the happiest moments the group spent together to show the contrast between their past and present situations.

Consumers can already see here depictions of, or at least references to, some of the most important events in the BU, that will end up appearing again and again in other works due to the fact that some of these are the moments Seokjin keeps going back to in order to save everyone. However, we don't exactly know their real importance to the story, but only to what has been conveyed already.

Figure 3 - Namjoon watching the customer leave after throwing the money to the ground

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) 'I NEED U' Official MV (Original ver.), 2015.

Figure 4 - Jungkook after getting beat up

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) 'I NEED U' Official MV (Original ver.), 2015.

The second BU video, the short film *화양연화 on stage: prologue* (2015), opens with a direct continuation of Taehyung's storyline as he is panicking and trying to wash the blood off of his hands and clothes. We see him call someone and say "Hyung[9], I really miss my friends." Then, it cuts to the man lying on a mattress at an old pool and staring at a picture of him and his mother as the others arrive at the place. The screen then shows a card that says, "when we are together we can smile" and the film proceeds to show the group having fun and laughing together, once again making reference to the main theme of how their lives are better when they are together.

We then see Namjoon writing "you have to survive" on a foggy window as the others are sitting around a fire. Seokjin shows them a polaroid and invites them to go to the beach pictured there, to which they all agree. This beach is tied to a lot of the memories Seokjin has of the others and it is where he is later given the proposition to go back in time to fix his and his friends' lives, so we can see that the film is already contributing to the exposition of the storyworld's topos. After spending time at the beach, Jungkook, Jimin, Hoseok, Namjoon, Yoongi and Seokjin sit together by the water, and Taehyung stands at the top of an observatory from where he jumps into the water.

Throughout the film there are many instances where the members of the group take polaroid pictures of each other and where Seokjin films what is happening, and this is one of them. This is due to the fact that he cannot exactly trust his memories in this world because he keeps going back in time and changing events, which he mentions in episode five of the webtoon *Save Me* (2019).

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[9] Hyung literally translates to "older brother" and is a term Korean males use to address another male they are close with that is older than them, such as an older brother or a close friend.

The music video for *RUN* (2015) is full of references that deepen the consumers' understanding of the storyworld by filling out expositional gaps pertaining to the mythos of the BU. It constantly goes into the characters' memories and back to the party it is set in, as some elements are used as points of entry into scenes that work as expositional material for consumers to understand the relationship between the friend group. One example of this is Taehyung's graffiti bottle that leads into a memory to show us a time when Namjoon and Taehyung were arrested together.

Some features of the story are also explored in *RUN* such as the pairings whose storylines intersect the most – Jimin and Hoseok, Namjoon and Taehyung, and Yoongi and Jungkook. Hoseok appears lying on a hospital bed and Jimin is with him, a reference to where they are located in the future within the storyworld. Namjoon and Taehyung's graffiti memory is shown, and Yoongi and Jungkook are seen many times together and have a fight.

Another feature is the fact that Seokjin knows something the others do not. We see a shot of Seokjin building a house of cards at the party with everyone else watching him but right as he finishes it, Taehyung takes it down. Seokjin then looks at the camera as if coming out of the memory and realizing something is wrong. Later on in the video, Jungkook and Yoongi have a fight where the latter throws a chair at the mirror, and Seokjin reacts to the sound with a questioning expression as if he is trying to remember what it means. Juxtaposed with the sound of glass breaking, we see another house of cards fall, further signifying the connection between the motif and Seokjin's mission.

At the end of the video, there is also a shot of Jungkook where consumers can notice headlights illuminating his face as he stares at the camera. There is a scene similar to this one in *I NEED U*, which raises suspicion as to why this has been shown two times already when every shot in a movie is important.

Figure 5 - On the right, Jungkook in front of the car in I NEED U; on the left, the same scene in RUN

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) 'I NEED U' Official MV (Original ver.), 2015; BTS (방탄소년단) 'RUN' Official MV, 2015.

After the credits roll, there is a scene of Jimin alone inside the same bathtub shown in earlier scenes, where the characters were throwing water at each other and making a mess. In this moment he is holding a polaroid of the group standing around Seokjin's truck at the beach which he sets fire to, showing the events prior to his scenes in *I NEED U*. This, along with the start of 화양연화 *on stage: prologue*, already works to build the chain of events in the story of the BTS Universe and to reward consumers that have invested their time into going after other works to keep up with the story, something that Jenkins (2006) also mentions as important.

I NEED U Japanese Version (2015) and *RUN Japanese Version* (2016) are mostly focused on choreography, but they still have the BU certification seal as they reference the story. Most of these references come in the form of set design such as the shots of Namjoon standing next to a framed picture of his "you have to survive" message, the various appearances of white lilies, the scenes of Hoseok surrounded by his pills that he threw out in the previous videos, Yoongi standing in a room full of mirror shards, and many others. Clues that will be significant in later videos also come up such as the telephone booth in Namjoon's scenes.

In the last release related to the BU during the The Most Beautiful Moment in Life era, the music video called *EPILOGUE: Young Forever* (2016), the characters are all stuck in a maze as scenes from the previous works are shown in a form of review of the events thus far. This video works, as the title suggests, as an epilogue of the first installment of BU content. Then, come the Wings short films.

There are seven films in total, and they all start with RM reading quotes from the book *Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth* (1919) by Hermann Hesse. This

novel is heavily influenced by Carl Jung's psychoanalysis theories and tells the story of a boy named Emil Sinclair who embarks on a journey of self-discovery after meeting Max Demian. The themes of the duality of existence, growing up and self-discovery closely relate to BTS's message and to the BU story, so *Demian* served as inspiration for the concept of the album *Wings* (2016) and the short films. This is one of the most noticeable examples of intertextual relations that enrich the BU, and although it is not completely essential that consumers read the book in order to understand the films, it does make for a richer experience.

The Wings short films present pieces of each character's storyline in works full of enigmas, references to connections between them, details about their stories and clues to what is to come in later products related to the BTS Universe. Although they do not have any spoken language apart from Namjoon's quotes at each one's introduction, the films are full of recurring motifs and important information that help build the storyworld by expanding its mythos, ethos and topos, and help consumers have a better idea of what is happening in the story.

There are many parallel shots that connect the films, such as the close eye shots that appears in *#3 STIGMA*, where a painting resembling a mother and a baby can be seen, calling to mind the scene in the prologue video where Taehyung stares at a photo of him and his mother; in *#6 MAMA* with the image of a carving inside as the lighting changes, indicating a shift in the man's consciousness; and in *#7 AWAKE* with a bird passing through Seokjin's window inside. Each of these work as clues to the other videos as the painting in Taehyung's eye also appears at the end of Hoseok's film, the carving inside Hoseok's eye is the same one Taehyung is seen doing at the start of his film, which he gets arrested for, and the bird in Seokjin's eye references the drawing Jungkook sends to Namjoon in their films.

Figure 6 - Taehyung's eye

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #3 STIGMA, 2016.

Figure 7 - Hoseok's eye
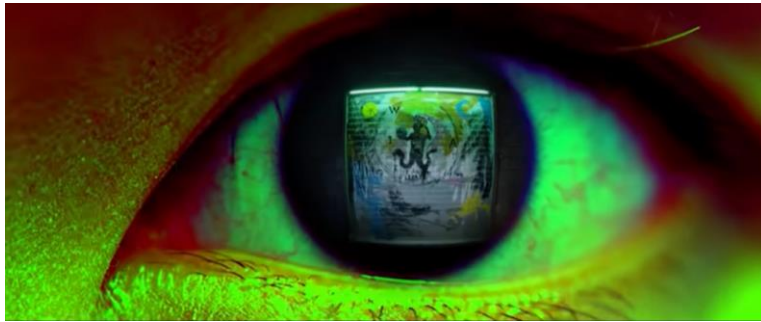
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #6 MAMA, 2016.

Figure 8 - Seokjin's eye

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #7 AWAKE, 2016.

At the end of Seokjin's *#7 AWAKE*, 6 polaroid pictures of objects related to the other's videos are revealed, showing the connection between them and relating it all to Seokjin's mission. In order the pictures show: the picture of the mirror with Namjoon's "you have to survive" message; the painting in both Taehyung and Hoseok's films; the apple from Jimin's film; the piano from Yoongi's film; the painting from Jungkook's film; and the scratched door from Seokjin's film with the word "lie" from Jimin's. At this point in the story, his mission is not known by consumers yet, but the quote at the start of his film gives an idea as it talks about destroying a world in order to be able to come out of the egg, a symbol of growing up in this case and in *Demian*.

Figure 9 - The polaroid pictures
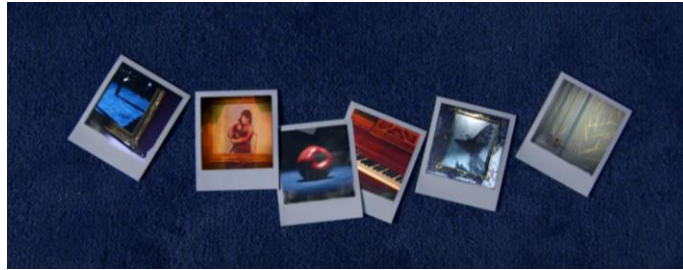
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #7 AWAKE, 2016.

Another example of the parallels that further develop the connection between the characters is the presence of shots of a burning piano in Jungkook's *#1 BEGIN* and Jimin's *#2 LIE*, whose story is ultimately told in *#4 FIRST LOVE*, the video focused on Yoongi. In it, the man breaks into a music store to play the piano that is on display, but hears Jungkook whistle to his song *Begin* (2016). Immediately, Yoongi stands and follows the sound to find out who is out there but finds no one. He appears in the middle of a road, still looking, and is almost hit by a car. We then hear the car crash as the words "would I have been different, if I had taken a different path, if I had stopped and looked back" show up on screen. He arrives at the scene of the crash to find that the car hit the piano he was sitting at and the store is destroyed, slowly catching fire.

Figure 10 - Yoongi staring at the burning piano

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #4 FIRST LOVE, 2016.

The sound of the glass breaking from the crash is the same sound we hear in the previous films, making it easier to relate the events to each other. Consumers can also see here the connection between Yoongi and Jungkook further specified as the first was saved by the whistling from the latter, who dreamed of the crash and the fire. We also see in the film a shot of the bathtub Jimin dances in front of in *#2 LIE*

overflowing, indicating that since Yoongi was safe, time could continue its natural course.

Yet another parallel we see in the Wings short films is the scenes in *#2 LIE* and *#6 MAMA* that reference each other. At the start of *#2 LIE* Jimin is sitting at a table being recorded as he stares at cards. The first card is the symbol that appears at the end of *#1 BEGIN*, and the man shakes his head and shrugs as if he does not know it. We then see him sitting in a hospital bed as another card shows up on screen, and he points at the other bed as a shot of a martini glass full of pills is shown, which also appears in *#6 MAMA*. After that, the man hits the air with his pillow and feathers float everywhere, further referencing the pillow fight he and Hoseok had in *RUN*. At the end of the film, Jimin can be seen staring at a picture of a forest, which is the same picture Hoseok can see from his window and stares at in the last scene of his film.

Figure 11 - On the right, Jimin staring at the picture; on the left, Hoseok staring at the same picture
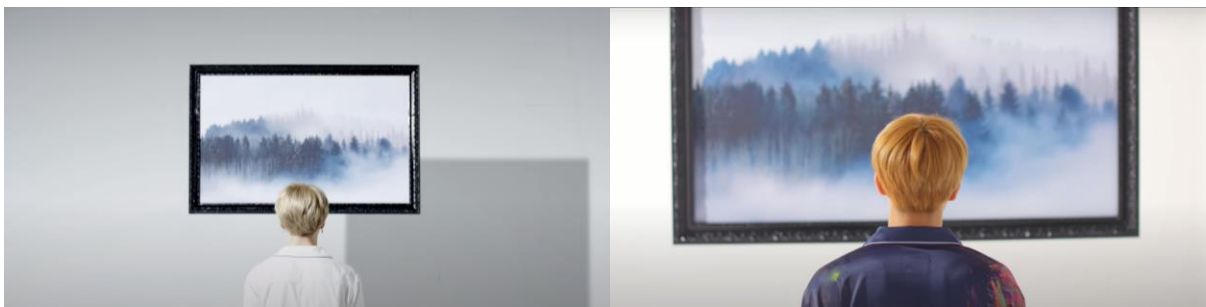
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #2 LIE, 2016; BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #6 MAMA, 2016.

Taehyung and Namjoon's connection is also further displayed in the films, as we see the end of Namjoon's *#5 REFLECTION* work as a continuation of the end of Taehyung's *#3 STIGMA*. In his film, Taehyung is arrested for making the aforementioned carving that appears in the shot of Hoseok's eye in *#6 MAMA*. During his interrogation, we see a shot of a tied up telephone booth and the words "there are just different whales who speak different languages here" appear. This is a reference to the 52-hertz whale, an animal whose call has the frequency of 52 hertz when other whales usually call with a frequency between 10 and 39 Hertz. Whales are highly sociable animals, but because others cannot understand the 52-hertz whale, it is always alone. Taehyung's storyline touches on loneliness and the inability to be understood by others, another recurring theme in the BU, and his solo film ends with the man asking the policeman to make a call.

#5 REFLECTION however, ends with the sound of a telephone ringing. When Namjoon finds it, he is met with the same chained up telephone booth. Then, the word "liar" appears in red as he cannot answer the call. It is possible to draw a connection here to the scenes in *RUN* where we see them getting arrested together and to infer that Namjoon might have made a promise to be there for Taehyung whenever he was needed, which is later confirmed by *The Notes*, and so that is why he is called a liar.

Figure 12 - Namjoon in front of the telephone booth

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #5 REFLECTION, 2016.

Additionally, the short films reveal details about the character's features and storylines that were not available in the previous works and help consumers make sense of the storyworld as a whole. One of those details is the confirmation that the man Taehyung kills in *I NEED U* is his father, by *juxtaposing* the moment he is asked about his parents in the interrogation with a shot of him being punched by an invisible figure, alluding to the abuse he suffers in the aforementioned music video. Another one appears in *#2 LIE* in the form of a sign to a place called "Grass Flower Arboretum" which flashes on screen, bringing one of the first details of Jimin's backstory consumers get. There is also the fact that Hoseok suffers from Munchausen syndrome, a psychological disorder characterized by the patient pretending to be ill and falsifying symptoms when they are not really sick, which is indicated by the diagnosis written in the medical record the doctor in his film is holding. *#6 MAMA* also includes a scene at the end where the character takes a Snickers bar out of his pocket and smiles as he bites into it, which comes into play later as consumers find out what happened to him.

Figure 13 - The sign to the Grass Flower Arboretum

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #2 LIE, 2016.

The next BU release of 2016 was the music video for BTS's *Blood Sweat & Tears* (2016), whose set design is full of symbolism that adds to the theories surrounding the character's storylines. Pieces of art such as the paintings *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560) by Pieter Bruegel and *The Lament of Icarus* (1898) by Herbert James Draper can be seen in the background of scenes, calling Icarus to mind. Icarus' story is used in many literary works as a metaphor for the dangers of not paying attention to one's limits, a theme that is later referenced in *Save Me* pertaining Seokjin's trajectory of understanding he needs help from the others just as much as they need his.

One important scene shows Seokjin staring at a painting called *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562) by Pieter Bruegel that depicts a fight leading up to the moment where Lucifer and his angels are cast out from heaven. This painting also appears in *The Notes 2* (2020) hung inside Seokjin's father's office, and the man says he used to be scared of it as a child. The piece of art is not mentioned by name, but, having watched the video, consumers are able to understand what he is talking about and draw a connection between what they saw and what they read.

This music video is also inspired by *Demian*, and has the same theme of trying to navigate this world in order to find yourself and the duality of existence – good and evil. Throughout the scenes the references to temptation are clear with the recurring appearance of apples, a major symbol for temptation in many cultures as it relates to the story of Adam and Eve. The members of the group are all being tempted to be corrupted and make their mistakes, and even Seokjin gives in at the end as he walks up to the winged statue. At the end of the video, there is a shot of Seokjin's statue cracking as colors slip out of it and another of *Pietà* (1498-1499) losing its face as it cracks off. At the very end of the video, Seokjin can be seen staring at his face in a mirror as it cracks. Consumers do not know this yet, but here is one of the clearest

appearances of the motif of "reality cracking" that indicates something went wrong and gives way to a new timeline.

In the video for the Japanese version of *Blood Sweat & Tears* (2017), this motif is very present as it is a depiction of another failed timeline. Right at the start, Jimin can be seen holding an apple and Seokjin is once again staring at *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, referencing the same themes as the Korean version of temptation and the fight between good and evil. As Jimin bites into the apple and Jungkook drinks from the glass Namjoon offers him, everything starts to go wrong. A fight happens between Taehyung and Seokjin, which prompts the start of a new timeline. Seokjin is shown standing in front of the painting as shots of the others alluding to their mistakes flash by, making it so the last shot of the man is edited against the image of breaking glass.

Figure 14 - On the right, Seokjin's face in the mirror; on the left, the timeline cracking
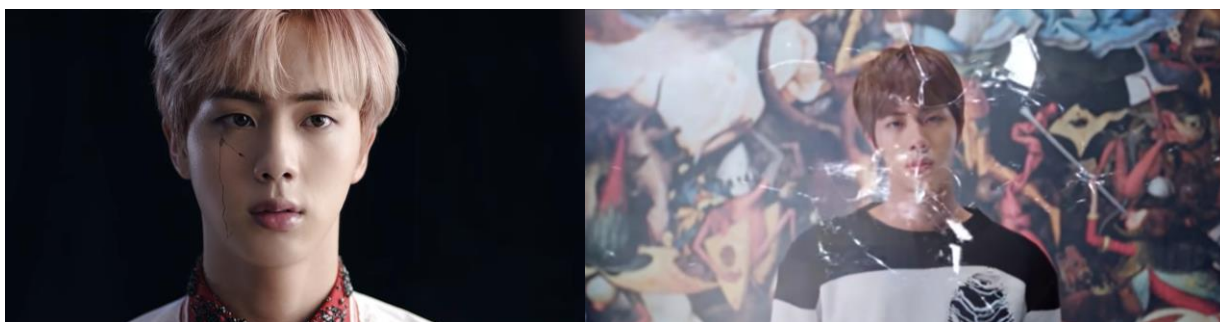
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) '피 땀 눈물 (Blood Sweat & Tears)' Official MV, 2016; BTS (防弾少年団) '血、汗、涙 (Blood Sweat & Tears)' -Japanese ver.- Official MV, 2017.

Then, the video closes with a scene of Namjoon working at the gas station as a truck approaches him. When the window opens, he is shocked to see Seokjin inside, who only says "it's been a long time, right?" and smiles. This is one of the first clear depictions in the music videos and short films of what happens in the story, Seokjin going back in time to try to help the others.

For the next short film, it's important to remember that before its release, an entry of *The Notes* came out on Twitter as promotion for BTS's next album. *Blood Sweat & Tears Japanese ver.* marked the end of the Wings era and this entry signified the start of the Love Yourself era. This means that the consumers' transmedia experience could have already started if they took the time to read the entry and follow the release of the mini books included in the package of each album. For the purposes of understanding the video called *Love Yourself Highlight Reel 起承轉結* (2017), this

entry happens after Seokjin has already saved everyone from the events of *Save Me*. The man tells consumers how the friends went their separate ways after a reunion at the beach and then he receives a call from Hoseok to tell him Jungkook has been in an accident.

In *Love Yourself Highlight Reel* '*起承轉結*' each one of the main characters meets a girl who piques their interest, and the dates for each meeting is indicated on the screen, organizing the events and making it possible for consumers to search for them in *The Notes*. One of the most important scenes in the first part is when Hoseok is practicing at a dance studio as Jimin films him, when his new friend comes into the room with a birthday cake in her hands. Even though it is not his birthday, she still beckons them to sing happy birthday. At the very moment he closes his eyes to make a wish, consumers get their first glimpse of Hoseok's backstory as he remembers his childhood and the moment his mother abandoned him, leaving only a Snickers bar behind.

Figure 15 - Hoseok's mother abandoning him with only a Snickers bar

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) Love Yourself Highlight Reel '起承轉結', 2017.

The second part shows us the good times they have with the girls, either pursuing them or just spending time together. Consumers are affected here by the upbeat soundtrack which can work to suggest that the moments being shown are good times. There are also indications that the characters are thinking about each other since we see Taehyung remembering Namjoon as he hangs out with his new friend and Jungkook recognizes the song he used to play with Yoongi as the latter's friend is performing at the hospital. On August 30th, we see Seokjin getting ready to meet with the girl he met, and we get a shot of a vase of flowers fallen onto the table. Then, the upbeat music stops.

The third part starts with narration from Seokjin, like the others, where he states that deep down he knew that under all of that happiness lay deception, and that even if he tried to ignore it, he knew it could not last forever. In this part we see shots of everything going wrong with the characters as they fight with their friends or get hurt. In Seokjin's scene, the girl he is meeting waves at him as he holds a bouquet of Smeraldo flowers, the fictional flowers in the BTS Universe, but when she crosses the street, she gets hit by the truck he got the bouquet from.

After this, comes the first moment that confirms that Seokjin can turn back time. Here, important scenes from the previous videos are shown in reverse, such as events from *I NEED U*: Taehyung killing his father, Hoseok pouring his pills into the sink, Jimin suffering in front of the bathtub, Jungkook getting beat up, Yoongi burning his room, Namjoon in the gas station and Seokjin crying as he sets down the lily petals he was holding. There are also moments from other videos such as Yoongi breaking the mirror and Jungkook being almost hit by a car at the end of *RUN* and Seokjin and Taehyung's fight from *Blood Sweat & Tears Japanese ver.*, as well as Taehyung jumping into the water in the prologue short film. As these shots play out, Seokjin says "If we could turn back the clock, where should we go back to? Once we reach that place, can all our mistakes and errors be undone? Will happiness be ours to stay?" Then, we are back to August 30th, Seokjin stops the vase from falling and decides not to meet the girl.

The short film gives the answer to one of the most important expositional gaps present in the BTS Universe, which Sternberg defines as "(...) the nature of the fictive world peculiar to the work or, in other words, of the canons of probability operating in it" (1978, p. 1). This works to expand the mythos of the storyworld by explaining the lore tied to the events we see, answering a lot of leftover questions consumers might have such as the reason why the same events seem to have happened more than once in different ways – Jungkook getting hit by the car and Namjoon in the gas station –, or what exactly is it that Seokjin realizes in all the videos that the others do not.

At the time *Euphoria: Theme of LOVE YOURSELF 起 Wonder* (2018) was released, consumers could already learn more about the story through the first *The Notes* mini books included in the package for BTS' album *Love Yourself: Her* (2017). This means that when consumers start watching the video, they might already have confirmation that Seokjin is trying to save the others, that the scenes being shown at the start are part of the events he has to erase. If consumers have watched the

previous videos, they might recognize the recurring representation of these events and pick up on clues like the fact that Taehyung seems to remember the other timelines from the editing of him looking at the camera immediately followed by Seokjin doing the same, or the scenes of him exhibiting an evil expression. After having the answer to their questions about the mythos of the storyworld in the Highlight Reel and the "What Is" extension in *The Notes*, it is easier to relate such scenes, and so the primary transmedia system of the BTS Universe starts to solidify.

Throughout the *Euphoria* (2018) music video, there are many parallels that show the different timelines and Seokjin's attempt to save everyone. One of the first scenes in the video is the recurring shot of Seokjin opening his curtains, but this time we are shown what he was looking at in his Wings short film since he has his finger on the same spot he touched what was then a mirror. He sees Jungkook saving Yoongi from the fire, Jimin saving Hoseok from falling down the stairs, himself helping Namjoon at the gas station, Hoseok sitting with Taehyung – who is not bloody this time, and Jungkook deciding not to jump from the top of the building.

Figure 16 - On the right, Seokjin touches the mirror in #7 AWAKE. On the left, he touches the window in Euphoria
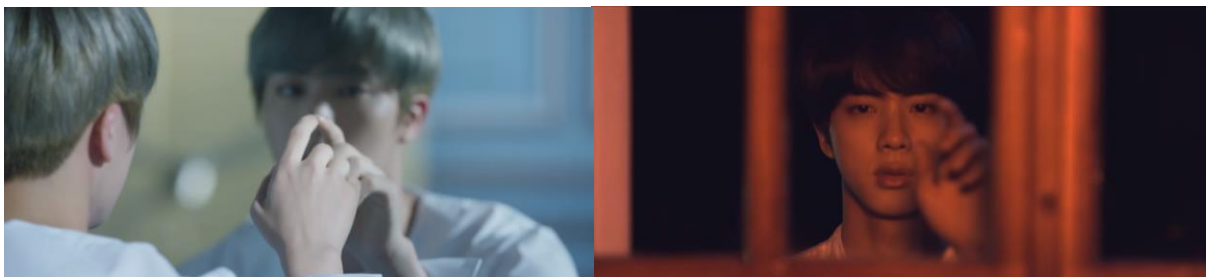
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) WINGS Short Film #2 LIE, 2016; BTS (방탄소년단) Euphoria: Theme of Love Yourself 起 Wonder, 2018.

Then, there are other parallels as the scenes of them all having fun are intercut with Jimin alone in the hospital, and the shot of Taehyung lying on the mattress from the prologue film is recreated, in much livelier colors that indicate that this is a good timeline. At the end of the video, it is Seokjin that is standing at the top of the observatory, smiling as he watches the others and realizes he was able to save them. However, the words "Hyung, is that all? Isn't there something else you have to tell us?" appear on the screen after the credits, and the same scene of Jungkook getting hit by a car from *RUN* appears again. This shows how a good timeline could go for Seokjin, but also brings up the notion of the time loop he is stuck in.

The second to last music video to be released as part of the BTS Universe is called *FAKE LOVE* (2018). The first teaser for it starts with the words "'Magic Shop' is a psychodramatic technique that exchanges fear for a positive attitude". Then, each one of the characters arrives at the Magic Shop and exchanges an item related to their traumas for objects that are present in their scenes with the girls in the Highlight Reel.

In the music video the settings are all places that show the character's inner struggles such as Yoongi's destroyed room that catches fire and Hoseok's room that is full of toys from amusement parks and is later submerged in Snickers candy bars. There is also an explosion where Seokjin tries to protect the flower he is guarding, but is unable to. This video can be seen as a representation of what happened before they get to the moment where the Highlight Reel begins, since they leave behind their struggles in the Magic Shop in an attempt to have those experiences. It is clear here that the depiction of the timeline in the BU is not at all chronological, emphasizing the need for further investigation of each product in order to make a hypothesis of the official timeline.

LOVE YOURSELF Answer 結 'Epiphany' Comeback Trailer (2018) is the last music video set in the BU, and it shows Seokjin in his apartment with the journal and the flower vase from the Highlight Reel placed on his tables. All around him there are other Seokjins, alluding to the time loop nature of the story, and we follow the first one as he passes through all the stages shown by the others. The Love Yourself era is finished here with text that appears on screen at the end of the video mentioning that Seokjin will now look for the map of the soul in order to find himself and so opening the Map of the Soul era for BTS.

Since the music videos and short films were the first products to be released in the BU, they are the ones that establish the main aspects and events of the storyworld and first show the important events. Through these works we are explicitly shown the topos of the world by seeing recurring locations such as the beach that is so important to the characters, Seokjin's room, the hospital, the gas station, Namjoon's container home, and so on. Some of mythos is signaled here through the depictions of the lore surrounding the storyworld such as the scenes of Seokjin going back in time and his narration in the Highlight Reel which can help consumers to interpret the events in the BU. Music videos such as *Blood Sweat & Tears*, Korean and Japanese versions, can

also point to the ethos of this world with the references made through other pieces of art.

However, a lot of the meaning picked up by consumers as they watch these videos is dependent on their inference skills and their ability to relate what is being shown to their previous baggage. This creates a type of timeline like the one from *The Matrix* (WACHOWSKI, Lana; WACHOWSKI, Lilly, 1999), which Marie-Laure Ryan (2017) compares to a piece of Swiss cheese:

> The structure of The Matrix can be compared to a piece of Swiss cheese. The film represents an image of the storyworld that is full of plot holes. The function of the other documents is to fill in these holes so that the user can form a more complete, more coherent mental representation of the storyworld. Conversely, the film provides information that completes the stories told by the other documents. (RYAN, 2017, p. 6).

The Matrix is what Jenkins describes as the optimal transmedia storytelling project, but this is also true for the BTS Universe. Only the small amount of narration from Seokjin and the quotes Namjoon reads out are not sufficient to explicitly convey the mental state of the characters or confirm the hypotheses made by consumers, and so *The Notes* and *Save Me* come in.

3.2 The Notes (2017-2020)

In August of 2017 BigHit released the first piece of *The Notes* through Twitter in order to promote BTS' next album. The tweet had the hashtag "#화양연화TheNotes" and a journal entry titled "Seokjin 13 June Year 22", narrated through his point of view. The text touched on what happened after Seokjin was able to fix everyone else's mistakes and ties into the Highlight Reel as it ends with Hoseok letting him know Jungkook had an accident, an event whose aftermath can be seen in the video as the man meets a girl in the hospital.

This is only one example of the role of *The Notes* in the BTS Universe. These works were important for the understanding of the BU as they were the main depiction of the main character's mental states, of their memories and of the explanations consumers needed to make sense of events they had watched happen in the music videos and short films. This means that, through this expositional content, consumers were able to form a better idea of the mythos and the ethos of this storyworld.

Additionally, since all the entries are dated, the book also helps to build a clearer timeline of the events that were dispersed in the videos.

When BTS released the album *LOVE YOURSELF: Her* (2017), consumers had the opportunity to read two entries from each character in the mini book that was included in the album's packaging, which had four versions, each one with a specific mini book. For them, that meant having eight dated events, which developed into twenty-four as the next two albums were put out with the same inclusions. Thus, twelve mini books were released in total, encouraging consumers to try to build the timeline puzzle with the pieces available to them. They serve as a paradigmatic example of Jason Mittell's "What Is" extension, as he states in his explanation of the concept that:

> "What Is" transmedia seeks to extend the fiction canonically, explaining the universe with coordinated precision and hopefully expanding viewers' understanding and appreciation of the storyworld. This narrative model encourages forensic fandom with the promise of eventual revelations once all the pieces are put together. (...) If one goal of consuming a story is mastery of its fictional universe, then "What Is" transmedia scatters narrative understanding across a variety of extensions so that a collective team of die-hard fans can piece together the elaborate puzzle. (MITTELL, 2014, p.273).

It was only in 2019, when the book unifying all the entries and adding to them was released, that this timeline was confirmed. However, the inclusion of mini books inside the albums inspired "forensic" behavior from the consumers as they tried to find what was in *The Notes* that was not inside their versions of the album and make sense of all the new canon information, which helped them understand the videos even better.

The Notes can also be a product that helps classify the BU as one of Jenkins' ideal transmedia stories as it makes a distinctive contribution to the storyworld and rewards consumers for investing their time into further investigating the story, while still being an acceptable point of entry to the world. This is due to the amount of expositional material it brings, which can help make sense of events as well as confirm or reject the various hypotheses made while watching the previously released videos.

As a consequence of having access to point of view variation, consumers were able to get to know each of the character's mental states, their motivations and their worries. An example of this can already be seen in the prologue of the book *The Notes 1* (2019), in which Seokjin tells a story from his childhood that happened on the day marked "10 October Year 9". He recounts that on this day, two men invaded his classroom looking for Mr. Choi's son and shoved his teacher when she tried to stop

them. The men then said they would take the kid to his father in order to get the money he owed them. Seokjin grabbed his friend's hand and beckoned him to run out the rear door of the classroom. The boys ran until they could not hear the men's footsteps anymore, and collapsed to the ground covered in sweat. Seokjin tells that his friend would not stop crying about how his father was missing and the men had come to his house the previous night to look for him. Seokjin then invites the kid into his house and tells him to hide in his room since his father never goes there, but when the man gets home, he hands his son's friend to the men.

This story helps consumers find out what Seokjin's nature is, showing how he will do anything to help the people he cares about. This is clear in the moment he looks at the kid in the classroom and decides to run with him, as he simply states the kid is his friend and that is reason enough to run out of the school with him and hide him at his house:

> I looked into my friend's face. He was trembling. Trembling hard with his head bent low. **He was my friend.** I reached under the desk and grabbed his hand. He looked up and I pulled his hand. "Let's run." (The Notes 1, 2019, p.9; my emphasis).

However, another important part of Seokjin's upbringing is revealed here that explains a lot of his behavior and his choices throughout the BU. We are told about how his father hurts him in order to make him obey, and how he tells Seokjin to "be a good boy", which he repeats to himself a lot in *The Notes* and other works as well. The father grasps Seokjin's shoulder tight, making him let go of his friend's hand and strengthens his grip until the boy gives up on helping the other.

> I looked up at Dad. He was like a massive gray wall. His face was expressionless, with even the exhausted look now gone. He slowly opened his mouth with his eyes fixed on me. "Seokjin, be a good kid." He still had that blank look. But I knew what to do, what to do to stop the pain. (The Notes 1, 2019, p.11-12).

In the first chapter of *The Notes*, titled "Shadow of My Childhood", each one of the main characters tell us of their family dynamics and childhood traumas, clarifying what their scenes in the videos were hinting at. Hoseok starts on "23 July Year 10", narrating the first time he fainted and why it happened – the overwhelming memory of his mother leaving him. Taehyung recalls "29 December Year 10", the first time his father arrived at home drunk and beat him. Jimin writes about what happened on "6 April Year 11", when, as usual, his parents were too busy to make it to the school picnic at the Grass Flower Arboretum and he was left alone in the rain. The last

information we receive at this time is that the boy decided to run and take cover inside the warehouse at the back gate of the arboretum. Seokjin recounts "21 July Year 12" as he makes his nature even clearer, telling us how his parents ignored him if he disobeyed and how he wanted to please them. He explains that his mother had recently died, and his father decided to send him off to the US, but did not show up at the airport to say goodbye. Namjoon also clears up his situation as he remembers the day of "21 June Year 16", when he watched the other kids play sports and have fun while he had to work to be able to pay his father's hospital bills. Yoongi describes "19 September Year 16", the day his house burned down and his mother died in the fire. And lastly, Jungkook touches on "11 September Year 17", the day he remembers when his father left since, once again, he has not received a birthday card from the man.

The chapter "It All Started from Here" indicates to us the importance of the relationship between the main characters. They all tell their perspectives on how the room they were obligated to clean as a punishment ended up becoming a spot where they hung out and had fun together, even on their bad days. They also write about the first time they went to the beach together, recounting that they decided to cut class and go to this beach that had a rock where people could scream out their dreams and they would come true. While on the way to the rock, the boys talk about their dreams, providing more information on their personalities. Seokjin reveals that his dream is to be a good person – as expected from what we know about him already. Hoseok wants to be happy and Yoongi does not have a dream. Jungkook, the narrator for this part, doesn't even understand what a dream is. As they arrive at the place where the rock is supposed to be, they find out it has been destroyed in order to build an expensive resort, but they still scream out their dreams even as they are drowned out by the sounds of the construction.

Jungkook's entry is closed with the boys taking a polaroid picture together, and him stating that "This day in the sweltering heat of early summer became imprinted on our memories in this photo". Moments like these, work well to give us a basis of how the group bonded, as they narrate their experiences together and let the consumer in on the importance of these events to each of them. However, on the last entry in this chapter, we can already see the beginning of Seokjin's mistakes as he reveals that he has ratted out his friends to the principal in an attempt to please his father.

"End of Summer, Beginning of Solicitude", the third chapter, consists of the events that worked to separate the main characters. We get Taehyung's account of how he found out Seokjin told the principal about his and Yoongi's fight in the past days but did not tell anyone. Namjoon talks about how he left the city because of his money problems. Jungkook narrates the day Yoongi was expelled from school because he fought a teacher to protect him. Seokjin tells consumers how much he regrets what he is doing, but that he had decided to live how his dad wanted him to and not chase happiness. In Hoseok's entry, he explains how Jimin had had a seizure as they were waiting for the bus and that the man's mother drew a clear line between them, isolating Jimin from the others. The chapter ends with Jungkook's point of view, as he goes to the room they used to hangout in at school to find some comfort, but realizes the days when they could all be together are gone.

There is a chapter called "I Must Survive" in which Namjoon talks about his time away from the others, concluding the first mostly expositional part of the book. Then, as we get back into the action and arrive at the time we started with in the videos, the chapter "What to Look for When Lost" starts. Hoseok quickly recaps what he knows about everyone else as he talks about how his life is two years from the last time he narrated:

> The last time I saw Seokjin was the beginning of summer vacation. He seemed to be avoiding me, so I kept my distance. I heard later that he transferred to another school. Yoongi, as usual, didn't respond to our calls, and no one knew what happened to Namjoon. Taehyung, who was particularly fond of Namjoon, began to ditch school at some point and was said to be in and out of the police station for graffiti on the street. Jungkook occasionally appeared in front of the glass door of the burger joint. It seemed like he was always getting into fights as he usually had cuts and bruises on his face. As for Jimin, the last time I saw him was when he was wheeled out of the emergency room. (The Notes 1, 2019, p. 67)

Then, we arrive at Seokjin's "11 April Year 22". In this entry, he tells the event at the end of Blood Sweat & Tears Japanese version (2017) from his own perspective. Here is an example of how *The Notes* fill in the gaps in the videos as well as how the videos fill in the gaps for *The Notes.* As well as giving a clear description of what is happening in the last scene of the music video, Seokjin asks questions such as whether he'd be able to put an end to their pain, and whether repeated failure means he should just give up. These questions might look odd for readers who have not had the opportunity to watch the videos and lack the knowledge that the character goes

back in time to save his friends, showing the distinctive contribution of each work to the whole.

In this chapter and the next called "The Things with Wings", consumers can find the description of the process of how Seokjin saves everyone. From Jungkook's narration, we find out that the scenes we saw of him with his arms spread out happened as he was about to jump from a building, but this time Yoongi calls him. In Yoongi's entry we can notice Seokjin's plan taking shape as Hoseok was the one who invited him to Namjoon's container, where he also met Namjoon and Taehyung.

We also have access to Seokjin's realization that he needs the others to help save everyone and that he cannot do everything on his own. This leads to mentions of him interfering so that they are always able to be there for one another at the right time. For example, the moment Hoseok is running down the stairs and trips but Jimin is there to hold his arm and prevent him from falling, one of the scenes shown at the start of the music video *Euphoria: Theme of Love Yourself 起 Wonder* when Seokjin is looking out the window at the "good timeline" and only now clearly explained in written narration.

> I thought I heard someone calling my name just as I was thinking of taking the stairs. That someone was standing in front of the emergency exit. When I took a step forward, the person suddenly ran through the emergency exit. (...) "Mom!" Hearing the desperate cry, I stuck my head back in. It was Hoseok, frantically leaping down the stairs. (...) I stepped onto landing. Hoseok lost his footing right at that moment. I darted forward and reached out my hands without thinking and caught him. - The moment Jimin saves Hoseok (The Notes 1, 2019, p. 106).

Figure 17 - Jimin preventing Hoseok from falling down the stairs

Source: BTS (방탄소년단) Euphoria: Theme of Love Yourself 起 Wonder, 2018.

Another important detail appears in these chapters that might confirm some hypotheses made about Taehyung, since he was depicted to know something in the videos. In Namjoon's "28 April Year 22" entry, he states that Taehyung has been

having nightmares that Yoongi died, Jungkook fell off the rooftop and Namjoon had been caught in a fight – the exact events Seokjin keeps going back in time to fix. In the chapter "The Most Beautiful Day of Our Lives", consumers who have watched the music videos can read the written versions of the scenes in *화양연화 on stage: prologue*, only with details altered because the events in the entries belong to the timeline in which Seokjin was able to reunite everyone at the beach having somewhat fixed their mistakes as can be seen at the end of the music video for *Euphoria*. Taehyung's "22 May Year 22" entry further confirms he remembers the other timelines, as he explains that:

> I had seen this all before. In a dream that felt too vivid and real, I saw this sea, the seven of us, and the towering observatory. I stood on the observatory at the end of the dream. Everyone looked up at me. They were far away, so their faces were hard to see. Still, I smiled at them. As if I was bidding them farewell. And then I jumped. (…) It was like the last scene in my dream. The only difference was that Seokjin was up there instead of me. (The Notes 1, 2019, p. 126) .

Figure 18 - On the right: Taehyung at the observatory; on the left: Seokjin at the observatory
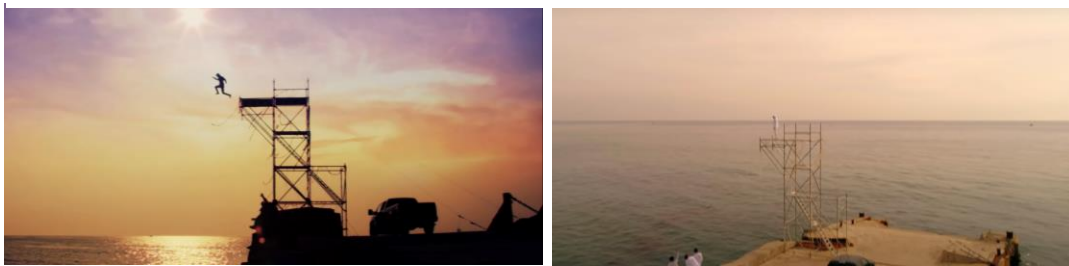
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) 화양연화 on stage : prologue, 2015; BTS (방탄소년단) Euphoria: Theme of Love Yourself 起 Wonder, 2018.

Additionally, *The Notes* reveal that it was Taehyung who asked Seokjin if he was hiding something at the end of the aforementioned music video. The scene develops into a fight between Taehyung and Seokjin, resulting in everyone going their separate ways and then Jungkook getting into his accident as we get to the first entry ever released – Seokjin's "13 June Year 22" and to the chapter "After Returning from the Sea".

In the new chapter, the characters describe the events we see in the Highlight Reel and we finally understand how they got to know the girls in the video and the reasons behind their actions. For example, in Jimin's "4 July Year 22" entry, he explains why Hoseok is the one helping the girl when he and Jimin collide in the dance studio.

I'd lost concentration while dancing with my partner. My steps got tangled. I crashed into her, fell down, and skinned my arm. The blood reminded me of the Grass Flower Arboretum. I felt suffocated. (...) I scrubbed and washed the scrape like crazy, becoming more and more frightened at seeing the blood sucked down the drain. I thought I'd overcome this. I thought I was OK. But I wasn't. I had to flee. I had to wash it off. (The Noes 1, 2019, p. 156).

Furthermore, extra stories such as the entry where Taehyung walked for hours trying to get to the next city, being followed by Jungkook, and reveals that his mother abandoned the family to get away from his abusive father. An entry narrated by Hoseok also tells of his time away from Seongju, when he is fed up with the others' behavior and decides to leave for a while until his ankle heals and he can participate in his dance group again. He ends touring with a dance company for some weeks as he also heals emotionally and comes back ready to face anything with the group again. These stories, although they might feel like fillers, act as a way for consumers to see the characters' development and follow their mental states.

As Seokjin gives his account in "15 August Year 22" we find the first real mention of the Smeraldo flower in the BU, except for its presence in the Highlight Reel as a bouquet. During the time the albums were coming out, a blog was also made for the Smeraldo flower shop that the man talks about in his entry where stories about the flower and the moment Seokjin orders the bouquet are posted. The blog makes an interesting parallel with other BU works as its posts were deleted and reposted in 2019 with some different details in order to refer to the timeline change, another work that expands the mythos of the storyworld with more lore about its elements.

The last part of the book depicts the events on the 30th of August, the day Seokjin's girl is run over by the flower shop truck. Right after this happens, the man says he hears the sound of glass breaking, indicating that another timeline is about to begin as we see at the end of the Highlight Reel. Additionally, the book ends with Taehyung's new "11 April Year 22" entry, where he talks about a dream he had that Namjoon died in a fire at the container he lives in, the same moment that opens *The Notes 2* (2020).

The second *The Notes* book is the product that closes the story told in the BU. It was first released in the same way *The Notes 1* was, through mini books included in the packaging of the albums *Map of the Soul: Persona* (2019) and *Map of the Soul: 7* (2020), and later as one book with the rest of the story. It depicts the final timeline and the process through which Seokjin is able to end the time loops. Here, consumers find Seokjin fed up with the contract and desperate to find the map of the soul in order to

end it. Having been through the same events and hardships so many times, the man has lost his own memories and feelings – the price mentioned by the cat on the beach.

Jimin, Taehyung, Namjoon and Yoongi come together to investigate the map of the soul and try to help Seokjin. They all find out their own information, and there is a representation of their chatroom showing them telling each other what they found, consequently helping readers review the information and piece together their hypotheses. It is only when Seokjin asks Taehyung for help to get his memories back that the group goes back to the old classroom they used to hang out in and discover a diary written by Seokjin's father, Kim Changjun, where he registered his own experience going back in time and trying to save his friends. After reading Changjun's words and getting his memories back, Seokjin finally realizes what he had to do to end the time loop: accept his own mistakes and forgive himself. This finally gives consumers the closure they needed from the BU.

The role both books play in the construction of the BU is clear: they expand the mythos, ethos and topos of the storyworld not only by finishing the story, but also by giving consumers many different points of view of the events they knew from the videos, by further explaining the world's lore, by revealing the characters' natures with their written thoughts and their perspectives of the world, and by fleshing out the settings of the storyworld as they give us the name of the city the story takes place in as well as tell us the characters' experience in other places in the BU. Also, they make it possible for consumers to build a mental image of the timeline, or timelines, of events through the dated entries and the events recalled by the characters.

Although it lacks the ability to depict details through images or to influence consumers with a soundtrack, the written narrative here has its own distinctive contribution to the understanding of the BU. Working together with the music videos, the short films and the Webtoon, it works well to make sure that the storyworld as well as the narrative becomes clearer in consumers' minds.

3.3 Save Me (2019)

The webtoon *Save Me* came out in the beginning of 2019, having each episode drop weekly on the website and amounting to 15 episodes. By that time, consumers of the BU already had the music videos and short films which established the story, characters, settings and overall arc of the storyworld. They also had the first set of

entries from *The Notes* released in the mini books inside the aforementioned albums, which gave them some further insight into the characters themselves as well as help them start to form a timeline of events. However, although these previous works had their own contributions to the understanding of the storyworld, they still left important questions open, such as how the time loop started, what the rules of this world are and how some of the scenes and references we have already seen connect with each other. *Save Me* was brought into the transmedia narrative to answer these questions.

It is a depiction of what Seokjin saw in the first timeline which prompted him to accept the contract with the cat, and what happens in the first few time loops he goes through until he realizes he will need the group's help if he is to save everyone. *Save Me* is another "What Is" extension which develops the mythos of the BU by showing the moment Seokjin makes the contract and by allowing us to follow his attempts to understand the rules of his mission, such as what triggers a new timeline and what he can interfere with to make his plan work. These depictions help consumers form a better idea of how the storyworld works and what to expect as they read the episodes and consume the other products. It also takes advantage of its visual component to give a representation of spaces that have not appeared in the audiovisual products, such as the restaurant Hoseok works at and the classroom the boys used to hang out in at school.

The prologue episode is a collection of the events Seokjin must interfere with in order to save everyone. It shows Taehyung killing his father, Namjoon in jail, Jungkook with his arms open on the roof of a building, Hoseok falling down the stairs, Yoongi standing inside the burning room and Jimin alone in the hospital. The last image shows Seokjin opening his curtains and looking out the window, where his face is reflected like in his solo short film. All of these scenes have already been repeated many times in the previous works, solidifying their importance in consumers' minds and reminding them of the events as they are vital to this part of the story.

Episode one starts on April 11th, when Seokjin is driving and sees Jungkook going to school. The scene makes him remember the times they used to hang out together in the old classroom they had to clean as their detention. Here we get the details of how the relationship between the characters started as, by this time, *The Notes 1* had not been released yet. This piece of backstory is incredibly important for consumers to understand the weight of Seokjin's actions as he rats out the others to

the principal for skipping classes later, the mistake which we learn from *The Notes 2* is the one he must admit and forgive himself for in order to end the time loop.

Figure 19 - How the friendship started

Source: 花樣年華 pt. 0 <SAVE ME>, 2019, ep. 1.

Then, Seokjin goes to the gas station and finds out Namjoon is working there, but decides not to approach him. After some days go by, he has a nightmare where the group is drowning and he is not able to help them. As I have mentioned before, he decides to go see his old friends because of this, starting from Namjoon since he knows the man works at the gas station. In the scene where Seokjin is speaking to the manager and finding out Namjoon is in jail, there is a reference to Taehyung's storyline as the television in the background shows a news story about what he did.

Figure 20 - The news story

Source: 花樣年華 pt. 0 <SAVE ME>, 2019, ep. 1.

Here is another example of how *Save Me* helps consumers understand more of the character's backstory, as we find out why Namjoon is in a detention center when Seokjin visits him and listens to his story. On April 11th, he was working at the gas station when he went to get the money from a customer but bumped the car's rear view mirror with his elbow. The customer then threw the money at Namjoon's face and started harassing him, calling him names and asking for his money back. When

Namjoon refuses, the customer calls him greedy and broke, which sets him off and makes him lose control and beat the other up. Then, when they are being questioned by the police, the customer keeps making fun of the man for being poor, which makes him not want to settle the accusation and end up being arrested.

Episode one of *Save Me* also reveals the moment Seokjin makes the contract to go back in time and try to help his friends. After seeing Taehyung get arrested, the man goes to the beach the group used to hang out in and sits on the sand with his head full of thoughts. As he is wondering how they could have ended up there, the cat shows up and makes the contract proposition. In all of the BTS Universe works, this is the only depiction of this scene and of the start of the time loop, which means that consumers who skip the webtoon will not have this information otherwise, making this scene one of the product's distinctive contributions to the storyworld.

Figure 21 - The contract with the cat

Source: 花樣年華 pt. 0 <SAVE ME>, 2019, ep. 1.

Another way *Save Me* adds to the understanding of the BU is the explanation of recurring motifs that can be observed in the other products, such as the breaking glass and the scenes that happen underwater. The motif of breaking glass appears in the form of a sound in a lot of the music videos and short films, as well as visually as has been pointed out in the *Blood Sweat & Tears* music videos, for example. It also appears, after *Save Me*, in the prologue of *The Notes 2*, when Namjoon dies in the container fire and Seokjin tells in his diary entry that he hears the sound of a window breaking before the first chapter of the book starts and the characters are back to April 11th again. This motif is representative of the beginning of a new timeline, which is indicated here by it appearing right after Seokjin accepts the contract and the image of his phone showing he has gone back to April 11th.

Figure 22 - Timeline changes in Save Me
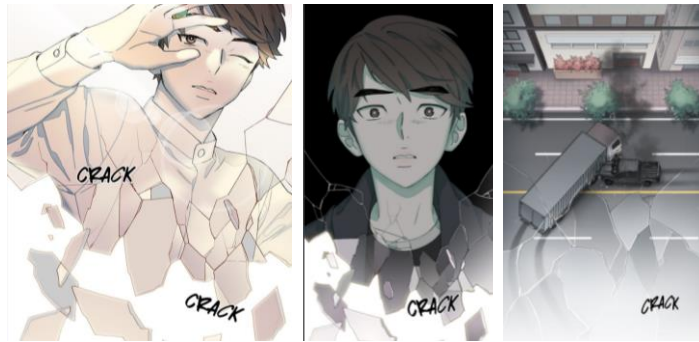
Source: 花樣年華 pt. 0 <SAVE ME>, 2019, ep. 1; ibid., ep. 2; ibid., ep. 6.

As for the underwater scenes, it becomes clear that this motif represents the dreams the characters have. Seokjin's dream in *Save Me* is shown to be underwater, and this kind of scene also appears in some of the music videos. Most importantly, it can be seen in *RUN* (2015), as it starts with Taehyung diving into water, throughout it he is thrashing while submerged, and he comes out right before the credits roll. Consumers learn from the Webtoon and The Notes that Taehyung is the one who is able to remember other timelines through his dreams as he mentions it numerous times, and in one of his entries he explains that he felt like he was underwater. It is a moment when he and Namjoon are looking for the place he saw in his dream, and when they do he explains:

> I heard Namjoon's voice as if it were coming from far away. As if I were under the seawater, things seemed surreal as they swayed. My breathing slowed down, and things looked hazy. As if I were dreaming. My body floated up and slowly spun. (The Notes 2, 2020, p. 126)

Figure 23 - On the right, Taehyung's dream; on the left, Seokjin's dream
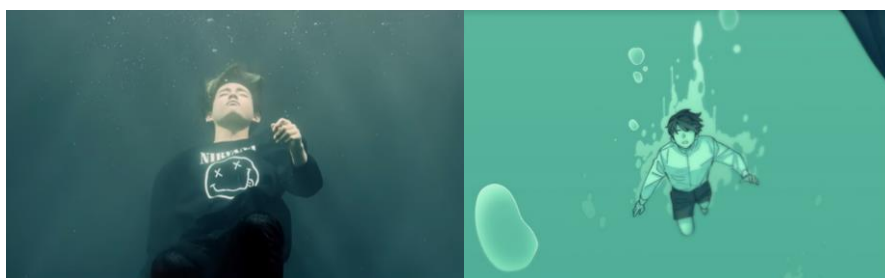
Source: BTS (방탄소년단) 'RUN' Official MV, 2015; 花樣年華 pt. 0 <SAVE ME>, 2019, ep. 1.

Starting from episode two, *Save Me* follows Seokjin's hardships as he tries to figure out how to navigate the situation he's in and, consequently, develops the BU's

mythos by revealing the rules of the storyworld. This is another of the Webtoon's distinctive contributions, as these rules are not hinted at again in other works but are only assumed to be understood by the consumer.

One of the first rules made clear is that everyone must be saved, or at least have a chance to be saved, in order to stay in one timeline. It is possible to observe this because even though Seokjin decides not to approach Namjoon in the first two timelines, the time loop does not reset immediately because he can still be helped later. However, when Jungkook jumps from a building nearby and dies, reality cracks and makes way for a new timeline since there is no way to save him anymore. We also find out from The Notes 2 that this is the reason why the time loop did not end when Seokjin prevented the others' mistakes, because he had to save himself as well.

Another rule Seokjin realizes is that he must interfere in the events that have led to his friends' demise one by one at the right time. He understands this because after the cat makes him aware that he is in a time loop and reminds him of his mission, Seokjin goes to meet Namjoon and stops him from fighting the rude customer. Having saved one friend, he goes after Jungkook to try to stop him from jumping. However, because he took too long to find Jungkook, he gets a call that Yoongi is in the hospital, making it too late to save him. The timeline resets, and this time Seokjin goes right to Jungkook after picking up Namjoon and Taehyung, not waiting until night – when Namjoon's fight happens. As they are trying to figure out where Yoongi could be, they get into a car crash. This makes Seokjin realize that he has to step in at the right time and not alter the events too much so that the group's fate does not change completely.

Additionally, we find out that even if Seokjin dies, the time loop does not end. This can be observed in the last timeline shown in *Save Me*, when Seokjin realizes he got so swept up in the success of saving everyone else that he forgot Taehyung would be arrested for murdering his father on May 22nd and goes back to April 11th once again after failing to help the man. This time, Seokjin is ready to pick up Taehyung from the police station after he was arrested for graffiting and try to stop him from making his mistake. However, when he runs into the scene to try to prevent the murder, he is stabbed by the broken bottle himself. As he is dying, he wonders if that would be the end of everything, if he has saved them and what would happen to the others if he was gone. But, ultimately, reality cracks and he appears back in his room on the 11th of April again, proving that the time loop does not end with his death.

Another fact Seokjin realizes after he comes back is that he cannot do this by himself. This is not necessarily a rule, but it has a big impact on the decisions he makes from then on and, consequently, on what consumers can expect from the character in future products. As he wakes up on April 11th once again after being killed, he remembers what the cat told him as it made him aware of his mission: "You won't make it out here alone in this entangled destiny." This makes him realize that it is not possible for him to save everyone without the others' help, which changes his plan and leads to the events he narrates in *The Notes*.

There are many moments within *Save Me* that also hint at the importance of the others' actions. One example of this is the scene where the group decides to help Jimin escape the hospital without Seokjin's knowledge. His initial reaction is to think they are too involved and that the time loop will reset, but after he tries to stop them, Jimin's mother arrives at the hospital and has a fight with her son. That night, the man tries to drown himself inside a bathtub and almost dies, which prompts Seokjin to help him leave. However, when they are driving away, Jimin sees a sign to the Grass Flower Arboretum and decides to run back, triggering the start of a new timeline. The next time he gets to this event, he immediately helps Jimin and the timeline continues, making it clear that he should not have tried to stop the group's plan. Other examples include Jimin saving Hoseok from falling down the stairs for the first time without Seokjin's interference and Yoongi calling Jungkook before setting fire to his room.

Figure 24 - Jimin saving Hoseok without Seokjin's interference

Source: 花樣年華 pt. 0 <SAVE ME>, 2019, ep. 11.

Figure 25 - Yoongi trying to contact Jungkook

Source: 花樣年華 pt. 0 <SAVE ME>, 2019, ep. 4.

The videos, the books, and the Webtoon form the primary "What Is" system of this storyworld, with canon contributions to the story, and exemplify Jenkins' (2006) ideal transmedia storytelling. The elements pointed out in this section of the analysis show the role of the Webtoon *Save Me* in the overall understanding of the BTS Universe as it helps consumers make sense of what they saw expressed in the first few music videos and short films and organize their reading of *The Notes* having received the information about how the time loop started, what Seokjin must do in each timeline and what the rules of the storyworld are.
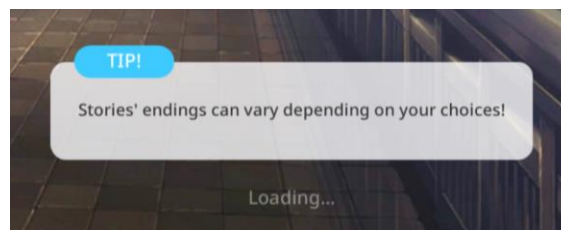
3.4 BTS Universe Story (2020)

In 2020, BigHit Entertainment paired up with Netmarble to develop and release a mobile app game inspired on the BTS Universe, which would be called BTS Universe Story. As a part of the app, consumers are able to play as Seokjin and explore the storyworld as they try to interfere with the events that led to the others' mistakes. They also have access to a "make your own story" section, where they can create their own visual novels and make them available for other fans to play. Furthermore, fans can collect themes and outfits for the characters if they have enough jewels – which they can buy or accumulate through achievements.

The gameplay for BTS Universe Story is organized in visual novels with animated images and text that the player can read through and follow. There are choices in each chapter that shape the story and what ending the consumer will get depending on what they choose for the character to do, which game developers call emergent gameplay. Loading screens also inform the player of the importance of their choices with tips that appear at the bottom of the screen. This form of gameplay is a

good example of the distinctive value the app has as it helps producers to make use of the advantage games have over other media, as Sebastian Domsch (2013) mentions in "Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games":

> The appeal of games lies in their promise of agency, in the promise of an openness that is dependent on the player and her choices. All games are therefore necessarily non-unilinear, since true agency implies choice, and choice implies differing outcomes. Many games of the category that Jesper Juul has called 'emergent' offer a staggering degree of openness or game complexity, one that is impossible to achieve in other media like print or motion pictures. (DOMSCH, 2013, p. 6)

Figure 26 - Text at the bottom of one of the loading screens

Source: BTS Universe Story (2020)

BigHit's intention to immerse the consumer in the storyworld is further evidenced by the website released to promote the game, whose homepage states: "Their story lies in your hands. Now is the time to be part of our story." This statement aims to attract fans to download the app and play the game as they are finally given the agency to decide where they want to take the story, or at least their version of it.

Figure 27 - Homepage of the promotional website
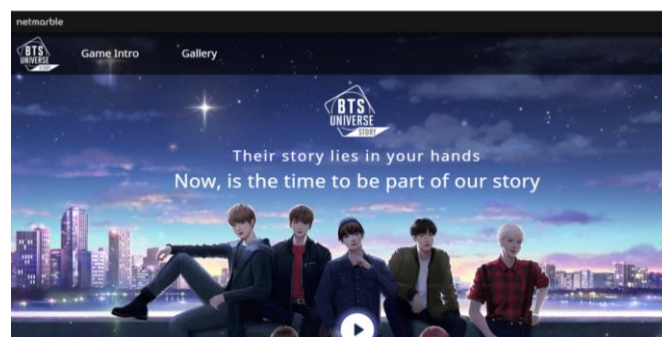
Source: The BTS Universe Website (2020)[10]

As another way to promote the new game, the company produced *BTS Universe Story* 花樣年華 *'MAP OF THE SOUL'* (2020), a new short film that brought to the screen some events from *The Notes 2,* as well as added a new scene to the

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[10] Available at: <**https://btsuniversestory.netmarble.com/en/**> . Access on: 23 Sep. 2022.

story. It starts where the story left off at the end of the music video for *Euphoria*, with the shot of Seokjin smiling on top of the observatory at the beach. Then, it jumps to the moment when the place Namjoon lives in is set on fire as a way to drive its residents out of the territory for the redevelopment of Songju, the event that triggers a new timeline at the start of *The Notes 2*. The short film provides visual representations of scenes such as the moment Taehyung messages the others to meet at their old classroom and help Seokjin look for the map of the soul, or when Seokjin finds his father's diary and finally realizes what he has to do to end the loop.

One interesting feature of the film is the representation of what the cat that offers Seokjin the contract looks like. The animal's eyes, one blue and one green, caused fans of Tomorrow X Together (TXT), another group under BigHit, to speculate about whether the BU might have a connection to The Star Seekers, TXT's own fictional story where a cat with the same eyes appears, and whether BigHit might have created a bigger transmedia universe than consumers had thought. Nothing has been confirmed thus far, and it is not my intention to bring another storyworld into this work, but it is interesting to think about whether this is just a reference to The Star Seekers or a clue to its connection to the BU.

In the video, consumers can also see the scene where the cat tells Seokjin to start looking for the map of the soul or there will be a price he will pay – his memories, as they know from the book. Because of this scene, the short film can be considered as BU's last "What Is" extension, which further develops the storyworld's mythos as it reveals the information about how Seokjin found out about the map of the soul.

However, the visual novels available in BTS Universe Story, created by BigHit and the fans, do not canonically expand the overall narrative. They work as extensions whose objective is mostly centered on making it possible for the fans to interact with and insert themselves in the story, by bringing already existing events and retelling them with the player's participation and input. They further immerse the consumer into the storyworld, letting them explore its topos and mythos, get involved with the events that are displayed there, and make their own contributions. Consequently, all of these works form the secondary "What If" system in the BU as Jason Mittell (2014) explains:

> This approach to transmedia poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, inviting viewers to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling that are distinctly not to be treated as potential canon. The goal for "What If?" transmedia is to launch off the mothership into parallel dimensions, with connections foregrounding issues of tone, mood,

character, or style more than continuing with canonical plots and storyworlds. (MITTELL, 2014, p. 273)

The official collection of stories inspired by the BU is called 花樣年華 <I'M FINE> (*The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: I'm Fine)* (2020), where each novel is focused on Seokjin trying to save one of the other members of the group. There is a total of eight novels in the collection, with two serving as prologue and epilogue. During the prologue, players find Seokjin in one of the many timelines in the BU, but this time he realizes that in order to really save his friends he should not stop at only fixing their mistakes, but also try to understand their perspective of the world and help them navigate their lives after the specific events he must stop from happening.

Namjoon's novel tackles his fight with the rude customer and why he would not back off from it; Jungkook's is centered on Seokjin trying to take care of him for long enough to keep him away from the building he jumps off and trying to make him comfortable enough to tell him his hardships; Jimin's depicts Seokjin's attempts to reason with Jimin's family to get him out of the hospital and help him overcome his loneliness; Yoongi's novel deals with his decision to give up on his life as we see Seokjin try to understand why he thinks this way and how to change it; Hoseok's shows Seokjin finding out about his not so cheerful side and figuring out how to help him cope with being abandoned as a child; and Taehyung's novel discloses Seokjin's attempts to stop him from killing his father by helping him and his sister escape their abusive parent. By the epilogue, with the help of the player's choices, Seokjin has enough information to save them all and try to stop the time loop.

In *BTS Universe Story*'s official visual novels, the fans are placed in some of the most important events in the storyworld and have the opportunity to control Seokjin's actions. This, in turn, takes them into different paths depending on what they decide, and so they are able to experience alternative stories tied to the BU that are not considered canon, but act as a way for fans to participate in the story.

The "create story" section of the app allows them to take the characters into "parallel dimensions" by introducing their own events into the timeline, deciding the relationships between the characters or even taking them into another universe altogether. Arguably, within the BTS Universe Story app, BigHit provides consumers with a relatively controlled environment to produce and publish their fanfiction of the storyworld with the spaces, characters, outfits and narration tools available there, such as dialogues, actions and sounds.

Figure 28 - Editing options
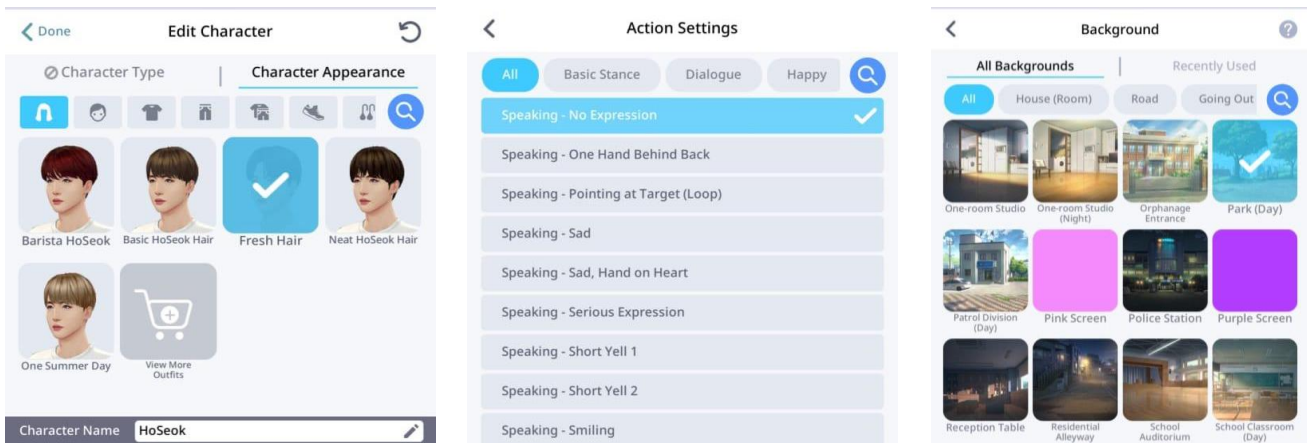
While writing fanfiction, the fan's intention is usually not to make a canon contribution to the narrative, but to flesh out some aspect of the story they felt was lacking. Writers tend to use the basic features of a storyworld they enjoy to produce new stories focusing on something they felt the original text did not explore enough, such as a specific relationship or event. Alternatively, they can also keep some elements, like characters, but develop new settings or completely innovative storylines. Jason Mittell (2014) also states that:

> Just as we embrace serial narrative for its creation of compelling storyworlds in which we can immerse ourselves, 'What If?' transmedia multiplies the possibilities of those fictions into the realm of hypothetical variations and transmutations. (ibid., p.274).

This is precisely the role fanfiction can take as a "What If?" extension of a storyworld. Although it is not to be considered canon, at least most of the time, fanfiction still allows consumers to bring their input into the narratives they like and explore the possibilities the original writer or producer has left untouched.

Some examples of fan-produced visual novels available on the app include those about alternative endings, such as *The Final Loop* which shows its author Linsey's depiction of the last time loop Seokjin goes through. The author includes a prologue to the story where they clarify that the novel is an ending they have created for the BU storyline, and where they let the player know that the events will differ from the canon, already making it clear they aim to write something for their enjoyment outside of the BU canon. There are also those that focus on adding new events to the

timeline, such as *Snapshots of Time*, where author HopefulLove creates new moments that the main characters might have spent together before Seokjin left Songju. Additionally, there are some authors who direct their efforts to a specific relationship between the characters such as AlliDani, who produced a new ending for Jungkook and Yoongi in *HYYH YoonKook.*

Figure 29 - Fanfiction examples
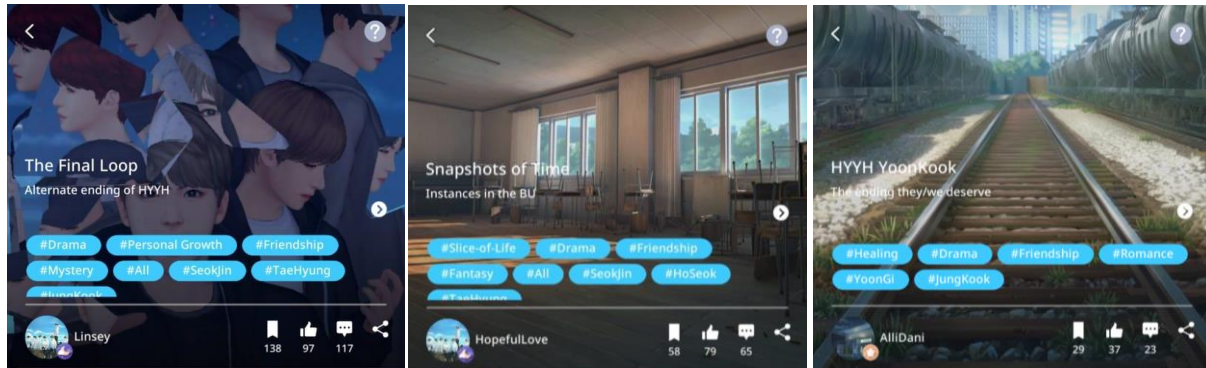
Source: BTS Universe Story (2020)

Aside from being home to an assortment of BTS Universe "What If?" extensions, the app also contributed to the cultivation of the fan community around the storyworld. It did so by allowing fans to make their stories available for others to play; by facilitating interaction between them with the option to react to a story by pressing the "like" button or commenting on the chapters; by featuring a forum where the fans can share screenshots of the stories they're playing and talk about the storyworld; and by rewarding both creators and players with coins they can use to buy new items for their collections, tickets they can use to play more visual novels, and affinity points from each main character.

4 FINAL THOUGHTS

There are still other products related to the BTS Universe which could be analyzed as paratexts that most certainly have an effect on how we perceive the storyworld. Some examples include the art toys, the character posters, the *BTS WINGS CONCEPT BOOK* (2017), which contains a description of the creation process for the concept for the Wings era, and the graphic lyric book series titled *함께라면 웃을 수 있다 (We Can Laugh When We're Together)* (2020). However, this text focused mostly on the study of how the transmedia narrative was actualized throughout the storytelling-focused works of the BU in order to show what it looks like as a real-life product and, in turn, make this concept more well-defined.

BTS member RM mentioned *Star Wars* and Marvel in a 2017 interview to the magazine Rolling Stones India as he explained the group and BigHit's intention behind developing the BTS Universe:

> "*Stars Wars* came out tens of years ago, but a dad and his son still go to the theater to see [it]," he says. "It's not just like a five-year or a 10-year thing, you know what I mean? So our company knew that and they always told us about how important it is to make a world like *Star Wars* or Marvel [did]." (Rolling Stones India, 2017).

These franchises are both highly profitable, of course, but they also have another similarity: the use of transmedia storytelling to expand their storyworlds and develop narratives that will be enjoyed by consumers for years to come. The BU does this in an incredible fashion with the use of a diverse set of platforms, which are all explored for their particular features, each on making its best possible contribution.

Henry Jenkins mentions the importance of this as he explains that if all the works provided the same information it would be hard to create a successful storyworld since "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). Most people who consume the BTS Universe are fans of the group, which means they will probably be interested in the expansions as content from their favorite artists. The content is still enjoyable in itself as music videos for the fans who want only that, but for fans who want more there is more.

As demonstrated, the videos, the books and the Webtoon form the primary system in the BU, which supplies the consumers with canon information that add up to one story. Each product consumed makes its own contribution: establishing the

storyworld and its mythos, ethos and topos; offering expositional material to fill in the gaps left by other works; revealing new events to form the timeline, or, in narratological terms, the sujet; expanding on the characters' ethos and their settings – the topos of the BU – and so on.

By making sure they have enough common elements to be connected with each other, such as characters, events, or even motifs, they also help consumers to recognize them as being a part of the same storyworld as Elleström (2019) points out. Furthermore, the mobile app game *BTS Universe Story* offers many contributions to the storyworld by expanding on the countless possibilities not explored in the canon narrative in the form of "What If?" extensions.

All of these features make the BU a good example of Jenkins' idea of transmedia storytelling, as well as show how this type of narration works in a real-life context. They also illustrate how Kalstrup & Tosca's components form the storyworld, and how this idea is expanded and transmitted across platforms. In addition, they also serve to show that both "What Is" and "What If?" transmedia extensions can co-exist in the same storyworld, making their own forms of contribution to the narrative and working together to make the consumers' experience richer overall.

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ANNEX I – BTS Universe Content Chart

Type of content	Titles
Music video	'I Need U' Official MV (2015); 'I Need U' Official MV (Original ver) (2015); 'RUN' Official MV (2015); 'I NEED U (Japanese Ver.)' Official MV (2015); 'RUN -Japanese Ver.-' Official MV (2016); 'EPILOGUE : Young Forever' MV (2016); '피 땀 눈물 (Blood Sweat & Tears)' Official MV (2016); '血、汗、涙 (Blood Sweat & Tears) -Japanese Ver.-' Official MV (2017); 'FAKE LOVE' Official MV (2018); 'FAKE LOVE' Official MV (Extended ver.) (2018);
Short film	화양연화 on stage : prologue (2015); WINGS Short Film #1 BEGIN (2016); WINGS Short Film #2 LIE (2016); WINGS Short Film #3 STIGMA (2016); WINGS Short Film #4 FIRST LOVE (2016); WINGS Short Film #5 REFLECTION (2016); WINGS Short Film #6 MAMA (2016); WINGS Short Film #7 AWAKE (2016); LOVE YOURSELF Highlight Reel '起' (2017); LOVE YOURSELF Highlight Reel '承' (2017); LOVE YOURSELF Highlight Reel '轉' (2017); LOVE YOURSELF Highlight Reel '起承轉結' (2017); 'Euphoria : Theme of LOVE YOURSELF 起 Wonder' (2018); BTS Universe Story 花樣年華 'MAP OF THE SOUL' (2020)
Teaser/ trailer	'血、汗、涙 (Blood Sweat & Tears) -Japanese Ver.-' Official Teaser (2017); 'FAKE LOVE' Official Teaser 1 (2018); LOVE YOURSELF 結 Answer 'Epiphany' Comeback Trailer (2018)
Book	BTS WINGS CONCEPT BOOK (2017); 花樣年華 The Notes in LOVE YOURSELF 承 'Her' (Mini book) (2017); 花樣年華 The Notes in LOVE YOURSELF 轉 'Tear' (Mini book) (2018); 花樣年華 The Notes in LOVE YOURSELF 結 'Answer' (Mini book) (2018); 花樣年華 THE NOTES 1 (2019); 花樣年華 The Notes in MAP OF THE SOUL : PERSONA (Mini book) (2019); 花樣年華 The Notes in MAP OF THE SOUL : 7 (Mini book) (2020);

Type of content	Titles
	함께라면 웃을 수 있다 (We Can Laugh When We're Together) (Graphic lyrics series) (2020); 花樣年華 THE NOTES 2 (2020)
Short story	花樣年華 The Notes: Seokjin - 13 June Year 22 (2017); Smeraldo Flower Shop (Blog posts) (2017); 花樣年華 The Notes: Jungkook - 22 May Year 22 (2018); 花樣年華 The Notes: Seokjin - 3 August Year 22 (2018); Smeraldo Flower Shop (Updated blog posts) (2020);
Webtoon	花樣年華 Pt.0 <SAVE ME> (2019)
Digital game	BTS Universe Story (2020)
Visual novel	花樣年華 <I'M FINE> in BTS Universe Story (2020)