

Viral Mascots and Detached Narratives: How Platform Circulation Reshapes Animation IP

Abstract

The proliferation of viral animated characters across online platforms has fundamentally altered how audiences discover audiovisual works. Rather than entering through source material – such as official episodes or feature films – viewers increasingly engage with decontextualised media fragments of intellectual properties. Short-form clips, memes, and other unofficial derivatives on TikTok or YouTube Shorts can now propagate independently of originating narratives. This paper conceptualises this shift as ‘narrative detachment’, whereby animated characters circulating as viral mascots are encountered outside the cultural and narrative contexts that originally defined them.

Traditional business models assume a linear trajectory across the animation lifecycle, in which narrative development precedes engagement and drives downstream value through subsequent chains of licensing and transmedia expansion. Platform-driven environments disrupt this when characters are encountered as fragmented artefacts, not merely detached from narratives but actively reinterpreted. Recognisability and repetition can generate engagement regardless of whether the audience is familiar with – or even aware of – the underlying source material and the story it tells.

While fan studies traditionally examines audience engagement with fictional worlds, less attention is paid to engagement driven by decontextualisation. Under algorithmic gatekeepers, the assumption that character virality foretells a committed fanbase or commercial success is increasingly challenged. There is a critical gap in understanding what this "detachment" means for the strategic management and protection of IP.

This article examines the ways in which platform circulation transforms characters into narratively detached, modular signifiers. Through a qualitative case study of *The Amazing Digital Circus*, the analysis contrasts official IP assets, including excerpts from the source material and Glitch Productions’ social media content, with derivative manifestations within the decontextualised fragment ecosystem on online video sharing platforms. Pomni, the central viral character, functions as a nodal point between official output and the two modes of derivation: participatory fan creations and algorithmically optimised, content-farm-style material.

Narrative detachment manifests in varying degrees, from minor contextual shifts to substantial transformations of character identity, both visual and narrative. This process facilitates aesthetic

convergence: the two derivative modes adopt increasingly similar styles. Consequently, the distinction between genuine fan-authored paratexts and derivative content exploiting copyrighted characters for monetisation becomes difficult to sustain. The convergence suggests paratextuality is no longer a reliable indicator of franchise familiarity; a character's viral presence reflects not necessarily an audience for its story, but rather the mechanics of algorithmic amplification.

For the European animation industry, this shift highlights a misalignment between narrative-first production models and platform-based audience engagement. As decontextualised fragments circulate regardless of linguistic or cultural boundaries, traditional localisation and territorial distribution strategies are undermined. By positioning derivative media as a structural component of IP management, this study offers insights into how market actors and artists can navigate and potentially benefit from narrative detachment in the platform age, recognising the new approaches to discoverability fragmented circulation may offer.