

The theme park experience: *Kingdom Hearts* and the franchise

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INTRODUCTION

When Henry Jenkins first spoke of convergence culture, he prophesied an increase in media companies exploring narrative universes, creating ways for the consumer to “buy into new kinds of experiences with those characters and those worlds” by “incorporating transmedia principles into their work.” (2006, 134-135) More than a decade later, his premonition on the expansion of media franchises certainly rings true with regards to the *Marvel* or *Star Wars* universe, whose narratives have been extended to cinema screens, comics or games. They are “entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained in a single medium.” (97) Although there are numerous sources that concern themselves with franchises in general, seldom is the subject of study a video game franchise. Hence, the on-going research takes the *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Enix 2002-2019) series as its primary study subject, in the context of a transnational collaboration between Disney and Japanese video game developer, Square Enix. The core questions concern themselves with franchise-building and transmedia storytelling, with an approach rooted in narrative theory to unravel the different layers of a video game franchise.

THE CHARACTER AS A TOURIST

Making sense of any media franchise is often challenging as the various texts holding the franchise together offer a substantial number of narrative arcs and any attempt to address those would divert from actual productive analysis. To avoid this, identifying what holds the franchise together in essence is key in an analysis. In the case of *Kingdom Hearts*, it is the premise of traveling to different Disney worlds as the (player) character Sora. In Daniel Vella’s paper *Modeling the Semiotic Structure of Game Characters* (2014), Vella gives a detailed framework as a foundation for a semiotic game analysis. The two most interesting categories in relation to *Kingdom Hearts* is *environment* and *role* however, allowing an analysis of Sora in relation to the game world as a possible way of accessing this multi-layered franchise. This permits the analysis to look at the story only when necessary and have a focused view of the mechanisms in place that hold the franchise together.

The (player) character Sora is a hero and an apparent refugee at the same time, usually finding himself in other worlds that are not his own. The story in *Kingdom Hearts I* (Square 2002) unfolds with Sora being cut off from his original world Destiny Islands, forced to venture through foreign worlds in order to find his lost

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friends. Although apparently chosen by destiny to wield special powers, and the pressure of saving other worlds from his enemies, he remains an optimistic, loyal and heroic character, whose youthfulness shines through as he marvels at the Disney worlds he encounters.

A detailed characterisation is possible with the abundance of cut-scenes, yet the focus should lie on Sora's constant exchanges with other characters and his reactions to other worlds. Rather than a refugee, Sora is akin to a tourist in the *Kingdom Hearts* universe, as he keeps marvelling at the new worlds he encounters, even in *Kingdom Hearts III* (Square Enix 2019) playing several years after the first instalment. Sora himself describes his travels as an adventure almost always in continuous excitement. In what will be described as the tourist gaze embedded in Sora's character, the basic definitions on tourism that apply to *Kingdom Hearts* are the following: "Tourist relationships arise from a movement of people to, and their stay in, various destinations. [...] Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures [...]. The tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them from everyday experience." (Urry; Larsen 2011, 16) What other machinery other than the Disney universe has the power to evoke these experiences? Other instances of Sora's semiotic structure implicate the relationship between him and the game world: Individual costume designs for Sora for corresponding worlds, e.g. a hyperrealistic pirate costume once entering the world of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, emphasise the notion of Sora cosplaying in those worlds, as if he were a visitor of a theme park. All this considered, it also elicits Jenkins' notion of evocative spaces as the game merges conventions of film, cartoon and computer game worlds: "The most compelling amusement park attractions build upon stories or genre traditions already well-known to visitors, allowing them to enter physically into spaces they have visited many times in their fantasies" (2004, 123). The connection between games and theme parks has been popularised by game designer Scott Rogers (2009) but in the case of *Kingdom Hearts*, it should be taken quite literally: it is not just like a theme park, it is one specifically tailored by Disney to recreate the experience of Disneyland.

In addition to the evocative spaces seen through Sora with the tourist gaze, the Disney worlds capitalise on their iconography by having Sora re-enact the narratives of each world with his direct involvement or simply have him as a bystander in certain iconic scenes that are almost identical to the Disney films. Subsequently, Sora's very character is a transmedia existence that befriends the other protagonists of the Disney worlds. Because of his own, strong personality and a fleshed-out original story in *Kingdom Hearts*, the Disney franchise and Sora's connections to the Disney worlds and its characters have evolved strong enough to become a franchise on its own.

The peculiarity in *Kingdom Hearts* lies within its constitution as an inherently transmedia product in the age of convergence, as the game utilises well-known characters from the Disney universe to create the backdrop for its own narrative. It is not, however, a simple cross-over space for the Disney franchise: with now twelve instalments of the *Kingdom Hearts* series, the games have created an infamously complicated narrative with a dozen of original characters and has grown into a successful stand-alone franchise. The efforts by Square Enix to create original characters and a lengthy story should not remain ignored when considering *Kingdom Hearts'* franchise-building, in fact, it should be one of the focal points of research.

CONCLUSION

A semiotic analysis of a game character that is embedded in a transmedia premise allows an insight into franchise-building and transmedia storytelling in the age of convergence culture, revealing the gazes and spaces that guide the player throughout

the game and in the case of *Kingdom Hearts*, the recreation of a literal theme park experience through Disney. Although there are strong economic ties to franchises and often subject of study in franchise research, this project encourages a more textual basis on understanding video games in franchise systems, especially those created in the greater context of transnational collaboration.

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